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Slip into a sepia state of mind

The meditative rattle of a train on track transports you not just through space, but through time itself.

13 Sep 2013 09:19 Daniel Scheffler



A trip to the bush usually starts off with a car packed with the children, square-cut sandwiches, blue-and-white cooler boxes and the requisite pair of binoculars. For this journey, grab those binoculars, but leave the rest behind.

Rovos Rail, with 25 years of experience, takes care of everything else—including activities for the kids and sightseeing from the back observation car.

My bush trip on the rail will take me from Pretoria all the way down to Durban—Rovos Rail's new route. With a 10am departure from the original colonial station, my friendly porter gets my luggage on board promptly. The station itself is a trip back in time, but there is nary a Louis Vuitton trunk in sight—multi-coloured suitcases in nylon and canvas appear to be the order of the day.

But once I am aboard, the train slows down time, and the scene takes on a sepia tone.

I make my way to my cabin through the shoulder-width passage of wooden panelling. As the sliding door rolls opens, my deluxe accommodation is revealed: four giant windows to peer out from, a spacious double bed and a bathroom complete with an antique ball-

and-claw Victorian bath. I'm ready to slow down to the 1930s, or any era, with a suite like this.

As I unpack, I discover key details to rail travel: everything needs a stable place to stand—including myself, to avoid injury and embarrassment. But this is all part of the adventure. The almost century-old cars offer up a meditative rattle and the soft patter soothes me as I ready for lunch.

Heading out of the smog that circles Gauteng means that the Drakensberg Mountains are nearly in sight. Lunch—a long and immoderate affair—starts with bottles of South Africa's finest wines (such as Hamilton Russell and Meerlust) in a newly refurbished dining car. We start with springbok carpaccio, followed by ostrich fillet with a fresh salad as the main course—all served on elegant white tablecloths, silver cutlery and Rovos crockery.

The afternoon is spent lounging in the observation car, winning a game of Scrabble with a non-English-speaking tourist, and the train does all the work as we ascend the historic Majuba Hill in KwaZulu-Natal.

With time to reflect and a bed ready for napping it is fortuitous that the train has an old school bell beckoning me to eat yet again at dinner time.

A dapper jacket, slim tie and shiny shoes spruce me up for the formal dinner. Conversations over endless courses of fresh lobster, local game meats and slices of cheesecake prepare me (and the rest of the guests) for a restful sleep.

The sun has barely kissed me good morning as day breaks. With pastry in hand, I am escorted off the train and into the Nambiti Private Game Reserve for my first game drive of the day. After some cheetah, quite a few giraffe and a deceptively cheerful hippo, it's time for brunch. I skip the food for once and spend the afternoon gazing at animals on my second game drive at the nearby Spioenkop Game Reserve.

Reluctantly, I leave the game viewing and venture back to the train for an encore of the dressy dinner in the dining car.

The next morning, as we descend the escarpment to Lions River Station in Durban, I am still stuffed from all the feasting and game viewing. With my arms folded behind my head and the KwaZulu-Natal Midlands in full view, a flash of the past comes to me—the ladies and gentleman with their airs and graces, and it shows me that nothing has changed. Maybe one less frill on that frock and an electric shaver for the gents—but we, the riders of the train, are exactly the same.