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The Most Luxurious Train in the World



ON THE RIGHT TRACK

1986

In December, Rohan received the first letter of permission to run a train on the national rail network. This was indeed a pioneering event for him and a remarkable policy shift for the railways.

1987

Rebuilding Loco 2702 BIANCA and the seven carriages which were to depart on the first journey was the first major activity for Rovos.

1988

Dramatically increased coach building activity took place, plus the arrival and rebuild of locomotive 439, an 1893 6-Class. Also, somewhat nervously Rovos took a short train onto the national network to test the running condition of newly rebuilt carriages.

Under the control of Roger Williamson the first video was shot and initial publicity photographs were taken on a bridge outside Witbank. The first dining room shot was taken with Rohan holding a table in place with his knees in a half-completed dining car, eliciting much hilarity.

In May Joy Hayward became Rovos Rail's first employee in the marketing department.

1989

In search of Rovos Rail premises, Rohan persuaded the Victoria Hotel's owners to halt their reconstruction and to grant him a long lease. Thus, the original 1893 Railway Hotel was restored as the new head office, staff quarters, training depot and departure point for the inaugural trip to the Eastern Transvaal on 29 April.

1990

More expansion was to come. To celebrate the business's first birthday in April 1990, a fully steam-hauled Pride of Africa journeyed to Cape Town on a four-day trip. 'At the last minute we decided to throw a party,' recalls Anthea, 'and the children and their friends rushed around Cape Town in black tie delivering hand-written invitations. Friends worked furiously to spruce up the Cape Town station platform, rolling out the red carpet and even painting pillars.' A succession of breakfast, lunch and dinner trips was run between Cape Town and Simonstown for the travel industry, press and corporates.

1991

Rovos launched a monthly Pretoria-Cape Town return trip and this has become the most regular journey on the schedule. Through the years routes have been adjusted or expanded. On the Eastern Transvaal route, because of the wear and tear of the 360 bends and steep gradients en-route to Graskop, plus the restriction of the train to 11 carriages with two locomotives, the destination was moved to Hazyview.

Locomotive 3360, a 19D, was launched in May after a nine-month rebuild.

Sadly, Bruce Manson, our first chef, and an excellent one at that, passed away in July.

1992

A few trips were run to Maputo in Mozambique, just 90 km from Komatipoort, with Rohan perched on the engine cowcatcher to watch for derailment debris. Ultimately, the uncertain security situation and daunting sight of wreckage strewn along the track made this route unattractive.

On 1 May, 2 years before Nelson Mandela's government was elected, Rohan piloted his twin-engined plane into the airport at Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania. It was the first South African private aircraft to arrive in nearly three decades. He was promptly placed under house-arrest and, after over-nighting in a bedbug-ridden room, was rescued by the unexpected arrival of a government official.

The first rooms in the Victoria Hotel were opened after three years of restoration.

On 3 August Beatrice Collon, still with us today, started in the marketing department.

1993

In July, the first Pride of Africa train trundled into Dar es Salaam. Since then, the Rovos Rail safari to Dar-es-Salaam has taken place once a year and has been successfully established as a premier world travel event.

1994

When tourism was at its lowest ebb in years, Rovos Rail committed itself to extending the route from Pretoria to Victoria Falls. The first journey was scheduled for January 1994 and was to run come hell or high water. 'Our reputation was at stake. We knew we had to do it. Like Scarlett O' Hara, we said we'd think about the implications tomorrow,' says Anthea. 'In December, after the World Travel Market in London, we received a booking that filled our train.' This route, culminating at the spectacular Victoria Falls, is now one of the most popular and has gained a worldwide reputation.

In a bizarre road accident near Pietermaritzburg, one of our first hostesses, Marthie Fourie, died after watching the annual rugby match between Hilton and Michaelhouse.

On 1 December, a significant milestone was reached when 38 redundant carriages were bought from the Railways - quite an achievement after nearly going bust a year earlier.

1995

Coach 15021, an engineer's caboose, was overhauled and positioned in the Cape Town Waterfront as a Cape Town office.

In September the Industrial Development Corporation (IDC) lent the company R2.5m to assist in expanding the fleet. This was very important to the company's continued growth and we'll forever be thankful for the assistance.

Eight rebuilt carriages were launched this year.

1996

January saw the first time two trains departed on the same day from our Pretoria yard - one to the Eastern Transvaal and the other to Cape Town. The first Cape Town to George journey was also run in this month.

In a year of frenzied activity, 15 rebuilt coaches were put into service. These were then used to create the second train.

1997

November 13 became an important milestone in the company history when Propnet (Transnet's property arm) signed the lease over the Capital Park property - 12 acres at the time (now grown to 60 acres). Today this is a shining example of a private railway yard of world-beating standard.

Unfortunately, we also experienced our first derailment of four coaches - luckily not serious and close to home, which allowed quick recovery.

1998

The workshop equipment was moved to Capital Park while Murray and Roberts vigorously started constructing the station, platform, crew rooms and other facilities.

Rovos Rail re-united South Africa and Namibia by rail in May 1998 with a 3 400 km seven-day journey from Pretoria via the historic diamond town of Kimberley, through Upington and the spectacular Fish River Canyon to Windhoek and finally to the sea at Swakopmund in what was once German South West Africa.

1999

In January 1999, the entire operation of Rovos Rail was centralised at Capital Park and the official opening of the new station was scheduled to coincide with the 10th anniversary, on which occasion Rohan's mother, Mrs Marjorie Vos, formally launched the 25NC Class Locomotive 3484.

2000

In February we had 12 coaches derailed in Bulawayo and then due to severe flooding in March we changed the Victoria Falls route to a 55-hour journey via Polokwane (Pietersburg), with a two-hour historic aircraft flight between Polokwane and Victoria Falls. Due to the deteriorating situation in Zimbabwe this itinerary change stayed in place.

A new 55-hour safari was introduced in September between Pretoria and Durban including game drives in the Kruger Park, Mkhaya in Swaziland, or Hluhluwe Nature Reserve in Zululand.

In November we finally moved out of the Victoria Hotel and sold the business to Gaby Falkson.

2001

Rovos Air came into being in May with the purchase of two 1954 Convair 440 aircraft. The aircraft, used to convey the train passengers from Polokwane to Victoria Falls in Zambia on the scheduled Pretoria to Victoria Falls journeys, are also available for charter anywhere in Southern Africa.

A panoramic nine-day African Collage around South Africa was introduced in June.

In August, a nine-day Golf Safari ran for the first time. Five top-class courses are visited with optional excursions for non-playing guests. Due to the popularity of the journey, this is now operated three times a year.

2002

The 13-day Southern Africa Air Safari was introduced in March. This exciting adventure includes an optional two-night journey on the train and two nights at six outstanding venues in South Africa, Namibia, Botswana and Zambia.

In June, a new addition to Rovos Air, a 1944 DC-3, was purchased. The aircraft is called DELANEY after a child who was born on board in October 1975.

2003

No schedule changes or additions were made this year and the building programme was again accelerated with the purchase of a further 14 coaches from the Railways.

2004

The continued negative circumstances in Zimbabwe were having a serious effect on passenger numbers to Victoria Falls and the aircraft situation was becoming difficult to handle profitably. Discussions were ongoing about the possibility of traversing Zimbabwe again.

2005

Rovos Rail started building 15 carriages in May.

In October, the first departure from the company's new lounge at No 1 Adderley Street, Cape Town took place.

The Smoking/Club Lounge and Pullman accommodation were launched in November.

The area of our leased Capital Park property increased with the inclusion of more buildings and an open section was developed into a soccer field.

2006

In June, the 1 600 km direct journey between Pretoria and Victoria Falls was re-introduced travelling via Botswana.

A freight train derailment ahead of us at Mbeya in Tanzania severely interrupted the Dar-es-Salaam journey. Guests were flown out to Dar in light aircraft.

2007

Rovos purchased a nine-coach train from Spier Wine Estate in Stellenbosch in January. On arrival in Pretoria the staff started work on its conversion to a function and excursion train.

A Diesel Blower conversion of Rohan's design was executed successfully on coal firing 25NC locomotive MARJORIE. To our knowledge it's the only locomotive in the world sporting this unusual piece of equipment. In effect this increases the locomotive's range to 1 400kms.

The first Pullman coaches were launched in April, along with 237 Observation car. Our first motor vehicle carrier was also produced this year.

2008

During January, February and March, the inaugural four Cape-to-Cairo itineraries were successfully completed.

Disaster struck in May when 12 frontline carriages were destroyed by fire in the Capital Park yard.

A new boardroom/educational facility was opened in the old restaurant building on our western border.

In December we were blessed by the arrival at Capital Park of a donkey foal named Lola, as well as two Impala kids.

2009

March saw the arrival of an historic 35 ton steam crane.

On April 29, the newly rebuilt nine-coach excursion train was launched on the occasion of Rovos Rail's 20th anniversary.