



TRAVEL

RELIVE A BYGONE ERA

Rovos Rail Safari to Victoria Falls

The platform is buzzing with activity. A uniformed porter is wheeling a trolley with suitcases to the train and, white-gloved, he is lifting the luggage into each of the individual carriages. In the meantime, passengers are returning from a tour of the station, while others are having tea, sipping orange juice or bubbly in the lounge of the private station at Capital Park. This, I know, is going to be an experience I'll never forget.

Text by Fransje van Riel / Photography © Rovos Rail / Unsplash.com

We're about to board the most luxurious train in the world; Rovos Rail, the Pride of Africa, on an epic four-night journey to the Victoria Falls in Zimbabwe. Soon afterwards, passengers' names are called from a list and invited to board the train. We're up next.

Inside plush green carpets line the beautifully red oak-panelled corridor that leads to our Deluxe Assegai suite. It's simply magnificent. Our dedicated hostess, Pamela, orientates us and shows us how to operate the heater/air-conditioning unit, internal telephone and digital safe. We are given a pretty zippered canvas amenity bag that is brimming with luxurious biodegradable-packaged products, and there is a complimentary bottle of bubbly in the fridge that is tucked inside the writing desk. Drawing our attention to the overhead shelves with ample space to store our suitcases, she then leaves us to unpack.

It's all deliciously luxurious. The writing desk also serves as a coffee station; a carton box contains various teas, sugar and coffee. We open the fridge, find two crystal flutes and, popping the bubbly, toast the beginning of our journey just as the train gives a lurch and we're on our way.

Outside, the late afternoon traffic blurs past as, now changed into formal evening wear, we head for the Observation car where passengers seated in Chesterfield sofas are having drinks from the bar amidst ambient music and the soft glow from pleated lampshades. The gong heralds dinner, and making our way to one of the two dining cars, we choose a cosy table set for two in the corner. The mood is clubby with its oak-panelled walls, bell-shaped lamps, heavily embroidered tassel curtains, tufted leather seats and, of course, damask table cloths accentuated with stylish crockery, elegant crystal glasses and shining silverware. Service and food is world-class.

I wake up early the following morning and, eagerly lowering the lacquered burgundy-red shutters, cast my eyes over the acacia-dotted Limpopo landscape. Time to boil the kettle that Pamela has taken out the previous evening. It's quite novel to have a coffee in bed while rumbling across the tracks. As is my first ever train shower.

Since it's still early, I decide to do some exploring before breakfast; there's no one in the Observation car this time, save for a member of staff who offers me a coffee. Sliding the door to the open-air balcony, I spend some time watching the world go by in the soft hues of the early morning light.

Heading in the opposite direction of the train towards the Lounge Car, I pass the kitchen to have a brief chat with head chef Aubrey Pieterse and the remarkable Selina Phogole, who proudly tells me that she has been working for Rovos Rail for the last thirty-three years.

By lunchtime we've crossed both the Tropic of Capricorn and the Great Green Greasy Limpopo into Zimbabwe. While guests sit down for another four-course lunch, the Rovos team is taking care of customs and immigration.

Our first off-train excursion takes place the following day as the train chuffs into Bulawayo station. We disembark and board a coach for the drive to Matobo National Park, where a scattering



of game drive vehicles are waiting to take us to the (San) bushmen caves to admire some stunning rock art. A short drive later we arrive at the foot of the granite Malindidzimu plateau which we ascend to the summit to visit the grave of Cecil John Rhodes.

It's dark when we arrive back at the station. A candle-lit table on the platform bears glasses, jugs of orange juice and the inimitable bottles of bubbly. Glass in hand, we climb back aboard the train.

Travelling along one of the world's longest stretches of straight railway line, we pass through the eastern edge of the Hwange National Park the following day.

The afternoon safari offers sightings of giraffe, wildebeest, impalas and elephants before a stop at a bush camp for sundowners. It is perfectly organised by The Hide safari lodge; paraffin lamps are sputtering while guests sit on camp chairs around a crackling fire to enjoy drinks and hot snacks from the bush buffet.

It is our last night and the black-tie dinner is sparkling; there is a sense of camaraderie and fun; we've all been part of this exquisite journey together.

We catch the first view of a steam cloud just before 10am the next day. There are the Victoria Falls!

As the train pulls into the station, and the wheels squeal to a final stop, we prepare to disembark with a tinge of sadness, but memories to last a lifetime.

For more information, please visit www.rovos.com.



HISTORIC GUIDE TO VICTORIA FALLS

Victoria Falls is arguably the most breathtakingly beautiful border town in Africa. With an estimated population of only 110,000, the town is set within the Zambezi National Park, an area once considered as being virtually impenetrable. Today, it is a hive of tourism activity that is easily accessible by road, rail or plane.

Whereas the local inhabitants have known about the Mosi-oa-Tunya – the Smoke That Thunders – for as long as humankind occupied the area, it was the Scottish missionary David Livingstone who, on 18th November 1855, became the first European to gaze at the falls. As a good royal loyalist of the day, he named it after his British Queen Victoria.

But that's just recent history. The formation of the Victoria Falls goes as far back as Jurassic times, tens of millions of years ago, when volcanic activity smothered a massive area of what is now Southern Africa with molten lava that over time cooled and solidified as basalt rock. Naturally existing cracks and fissures expanded through progressive erosion brought about by millions of litres of water from the Zambezi River.

Archaeologists have found evidence of stone artefacts from Homo habilis dating back as far as three million years. Further stone weapons and digging tools date back to a later Stone Age, between 50,000 and 10,000 years. These early stone age people were displaced by the Khoisan gatherers, who were eventually superseded by the southern Tsonga people, who today are known as the Batoka tribe.

The falls, twice the size of their famous cousin, the Niagara Falls, are one of the Seven Natural Wonders of the World and were conscripted as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1989.

Early European settlement began around 1900 when Cecil John Rhodes envisaged a railway line running from the Cape to Cairo to transport the harvesting of natural resources such as animal skins, ivory, timber and minerals. The 650 foot long Victoria Falls Bridge, also Rhodes' vision, was completed after an exhausting 14 months of construction on 11 April 1905. Rhodes died at the age of 48 at his cottage in Muizenberg in 1901, never having seen the completed bridge.

Victoria Falls town offers a vast array of outdoor activities and adrenaline sports, including bungee jumping and river rafting, around the canyon directly below the bridge. For those seeking slightly less adventure, a tour of the falls is a must. Another way to see the spectacular landscape and the flowing cascade of water is by taking a helicopter flip. Flights are between 15 and 22 minutes. There are a number of operators conducting helicopter tours around town.

There is a wide diversity of tourist shops, hotels, lodges and camps to suit most budgets. Sunrise and sunset boat cruises are a popular means to explore the Zambezi upstream, while many safari lodges and camps offer these along with game drives in the Zambezi National Park.

For more information, contact the Zimbabwe Tourism Board at www.zimbabwetourism.net.