

The Washington Post

# Travel

SUNDAY, MARCH 4, 2012

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**NAVIGATOR**  
**Check this**  
 The travel industry's much-maligned opt-out box may be slowly pulling a disappearing act. **F2**

**Bed Check** A New York hostelry that runs like a well-oiled business machine. **F2**  
**What's the Deal?** We scope out the week's best travel bargains for you. **F2**  
**Travel Talk** Finding quick getaways, vacation rentals in France, and more. **F5**  
**CHAT** We answer reader questions Monday at noon at [live.washingtonpost.com](http://live.washingtonpost.com).



**ESCAPES**  
**Colonial stronghold**  
 This Revolutionary-era Delaware town boasts a historic district in mint condition. **F6**



MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

The California Zephyr passes through Colorado's Gore and Glenwood canyons before heading through the city of Glenwood Springs, along what is often considered Amtrak's most spectacular stretch.

# RIDING THE RAILS

Amtrak's cross-country routes provide a window on an America you don't often see

BY MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN  
 Special to The Washington Post

There I was, in the middle of the Rocky Mountains, looking down at the Colorado River. Animal tracks in the snow made a dotted line beside the water. But where, I wondered, were the bighorn sheep? The black bears? I pressed my nose to the glass and followed the tracks carefully, expecting — any second now — to see wildlife.

I was in my 40th hour aboard Amtrak, nearly 2,000 miles into a 3,218-mile cross-country adventure. I'd packed five books, my laptop, several movies and hours of music, figuring that I'd have plenty of time to kill. But I hadn't unpacked any of it. Instead, I was so enthralled by the

landscape that I'd forgotten I was supposed to be bored. And at this moment, I was convinced that if I focused with all my might, I would spot an animal.

Just then, the cafe car attendant yelled up from down below: "Other side!" As he sprinted up the stairs, a couple of us hurled ourselves to the right side of the car. "Did you see the elk?" he asked breathlessly.

By that point, the elk were far behind us. I returned to my seat and resolved to enjoy the view, with or without giant creature sightings. But before long, the animal prints had lured my gaze back to the snow deep in the canyon, on the bank of the river.

AMTRAK CONTINUED ON F4

Final destination:  
**Emeryville, Calif.**

2,438 miles

Stop: **Chicago**  
 board the California Zephyr

Start:  
**Washington**  
 board the Capitol Limited

Total distance traveled: **3,218 miles over roughly three days**

**780 miles**

## Chugging out of Africa and into more genteel times

BY SANDRA MACGREGOR  
 Special to The Washington Post

As the train pulls out of the station, and its tentative, sluggish chugs become confident clackety-clacks, it occurs to me that I have quite possibly made a terrible mistake.

I don't like trains. This is due mainly to my desire to get to any destination in the quickest way possible — and also to an unfortunate propensity for motion sickness.

Yet somehow, charmed by a friend's enthusiasm for locomotives, I have committed to spending the next 48 hours en route from Cape Town to Pretoria, South Africa, aboard Rovos Rail.

Luckily, before I can even begin to calculate the likelihood of a successful leap to the tracks, I make the acquaintance of Adam, our onboard sommelier, in the lounge car. He astutely suggests that my train trepidation might respond favorably to a glass of pinotage from a stellar South African winery.

Adam is not wrong. As the warmth of the wine runs through me, I sink back into a plush armchair and glance out the window in time to see the iconic Table Mountain recede in the distance as we begin cutting a serpentine path toward the lush,



ROVOS RAIL

ROVOS RAIL CONTINUED ON F3

The journey from Cape Town to Pretoria, South Africa — two hours by plane — takes two luxuriant days on Rovos Rail's handsomely restored trains.



ROVOS RAIL

South Africa's Rovos Rail emphasizes the journey over the destination, with an air of elegance and history aboard its meandering trains.

## Cape Town to Pretoria, with a stop in the past

### ROVOS RAIL FROM FI

mountain-flanked vineyards of Paarl, one of South Africa's premier wine regions.

Maybe this antiquated form of transport does have something to offer, after all.

Rovos Rail is a beautiful anachronism: an authentically refurbished Edwardian-style train designed to take guests back in time as it meanders through some of South Africa's least-seen but most spectacular countryside, complete with excursions to two of the country's historical highlights. And although the voyage may seem slow to some — the trip from Cape Town to Pretoria takes only two hours by plane but two days via Rovos Rail — guests aboard the company's flagship train, the *Pride of Africa*, are more than happy to trade haste for history. After all, it's not every day that one gets to ride a time machine on tracks.

In operation since 1989, Rovos Rail has always been more about the journey than the destination. Owner Rohan Vos has translated a lifelong passion for the lost art of train travel into a railway company that aims to provide guests with a luxurious locomotive journey that, in the company's words, recaptures "the romance and atmosphere of a bygone era" of travel. To that end, Vos has visited scrap yards and salvaged train coaches dating from as far back as the 1920s. And it is in those exquisitely restored "rescues" that guests travel across the country (or the continent; Rovos's longest trip is a 34-day voyage from Cape Town to Cairo). Trains are limited to 20 carriages and no more than 72 guests on each journey.

A few hours into the voyage, we gather with other passengers in the antique observation car; its enlarged windows and open-air balcony provide the perfect vantage point from which to view the majestic Hex River Mountains. Among the highest in the Western Cape, the peaks are peppered with fynbos, a type of shrublike, flowering vegetation native to South Africa. Because this is one of the country's best fruit-growing regions, however, the mountains' lower reaches have been planted with vineyards and fruit trees vying for sunlight and space.

Our interest in the scenery is momentarily replaced with a hankering for scones as tea is set out in the adjacent lounge car. "Don't you feel like you've stepped into a scene from that Agatha Christie classic, 'Murder on the Orient Express'?" asks a well-read guest, taking another sip of his tea while eyeing a slice of cheesecake. "Well, my waistline's getting murdered," a woman responds ruefully as she reaches for another finger sandwich.

Oak-, mahogany- and cherry-paneled coaches, antique fixtures, handcrafted leather chairs and historic prints all conspire to subvert reality and transport passengers back to the early 20th century. Lulled by the motion of the train and too enconced in our comfy seats to move, the rest of us lazily eye the snacks and cakes set out for tea and focus on summoning the strength to order a cocktail from the bar.

Just as the notion of a late afternoon nap begins to form in my mind, a startling change in the landscape draws me to the observation car once more. I marvel with other passengers as we leave behind the verdant mountains of the Western Cape and head into the barren, arid heart of South Africa's desert region, known as the Great Karoo. Here, ranchland replaces vineyards, and striking, rocky, pockmarked mountains command the horizon. There are no roads through these mountains; our train and the occasional group of meerkats playing in the fields are the only traffic. What is there to do but order another cocktail and enjoy the view?

Come supper time, I am beginning to regret my pre-dinner cocktails when a glance at the tempting menu informs me that each of the meal's four courses is paired with a carefully selected South African wine. (Everything on Rovos, including alcohol, is included in the ticket price.) Though I am no expert, the oohs and aahs coming from the guests at the next table as they scan the wine list tell me that I'm in for a treat. "It's like having your own personal wine tutelage," my vinifera-loving neighbors inform me.

As impressed as I am with the food and the wine, it's the Victorian-style dining car that has really captured my imagination. Lovely hand-carved teak pillars rise from the floor and fold gracefully into arches toward the ceiling. The decor is set off beautifully by frilled cream-colored lamps suspended from the ceiling; they're well positioned to highlight the exquisitely laid-out tables that are set with Rovos Rail's privately commissioned and monogrammed china and silverware.

But the most striking aspect of this epitome of elegance? It's we passengers, if I do say so myself. Although during the day our comfortable attire of shorts, T-shirts and sandals had seemed somewhat incongruous in the train's objet-d'art atmosphere, at dinner (having heeded Rovos's request for formal attire) we all look dazzling in evening gowns and suits, with a couple of men especially elegant in tuxedos.

The food does put up a good fight trying to outshine the passengers. The succession of sophisticated and beautifully plated courses confounds all expectations of what can be produced in the confines of a train galley. The key distinction between Rovos

and comparable epicurean experiences I've had is generosity. Tonight, after a succulent main course of lobster, our waiters actually go around the dining car asking guests if they would like seconds. Why, oh why, did I have to fill up on wine?

On this antiquated form of transport, because there are no radios or televisions and the use of cellphones and laptops is strictly confined to guests' suites, conversation and constellation identification are popular after-dinner pastimes. The evening's celestial display is particularly breathtaking as we continue through the hauntingly desolate Great Karoo, home to the largest telescope in the Southern Hemisphere and one of the best places on the planet for stargazing.

The night sky is burning brightly, and a group of South Africans ("We decided to be tourists in our own country," they told me earlier) takes some of us more far-flung tourists out on the observation deck to teach us the Afrikaans names for a few of the Southern Hemisphere's constellations. Thanks to their enthusiastic guidance, I catch my first sighting of Suiderkruis (the Southern Cross) and Drie Susters (Three Sisters). That night, under the influence of the preternaturally bright stars and the deep, throaty cadence of Afrikaans, I fall in love with South Africa.

Pining slightly for Ursa Major (which can be seen only in the Northern Hemisphere), I retire to my antique, wood-paneled sleeper car, opening the window just a crack to let in some desert air (windows that open are a rarity in sleeper coaches). At night, the train slows to a sluggish chug, and I can't escape the sensation that I'm in an outrageously elegant, albeit large, perambulator being rocked to sleep. It is one of the best slumbers of my life.

During the day, with the stars out of sight, guests' entertainment needs are met by two short off-train excursions, both of which, in keeping with Rovos's ethos, also provide an admiring nod to history.

More Victorian period piece than functioning town, Matjiesfontein was once an important rest stop for travelers riding the Cape Government Railways. Now, however, set out alone on the plains of the Great Karoo, it gives the impression of an otherworldly



JONATHAN STRUG

Kimberley, South Africa, is home to what is claimed to be the world's largest hand-dug hole, a legacy of the diamond mining in the area.



LARIS KARKLIS/THE WASHINGTON POST



ROVOS RAIL

The dining car is a restored coach from the early 20th century. Like many of Rovos's coaches, it was rescued from a scrap yard.

### DETAILS

#### Rovos Rail

P.O. Box 2837  
Pretoria, South Africa  
011-27-12-315-8242  
www.rovos.com

The trip between Cape Town and Pretoria starts at \$1,700 per person double; single supplement is 50 percent. Price includes all meals, excursions and alcoholic beverages.

Rovos offers a variety of other train trips in South Africa as well as the continent. Check Web site for details and rates.

oasis. A very real and refreshing beer at the pub in the Lord Milner Hotel (which claims to be the country's last authentic vestige of Victoriana) confirms that the town is not a mirage. We are joined in our departure by a herd of curious springbok, and as they run alongside the train, I can almost believe that their stares reflect

envy at our speed.

Our next excursion, the town of Kimberley, is a dangerous place for anyone thinking of getting engaged. Diamond sellers abound in this town, which once was the center of the country's diamond rush and home to one of De Beers's largest mines. The tour of the former mine and diamond museum is interesting, but the real treat (for those not afraid of heights) is a trip to the rim of the seemingly bottomless "Big Hole," which was made by prospectors nearly a century ago and claims to be the largest hand-dug hole in the world.

For bird lovers, one of the most exciting sights might be a few miles outside Kimberley. Within minutes of our departure from the town, crew members walk through the train announcing "Flamingos in 10 minutes. Flamingos in 10 minutes." We all head to the observation car to get the best view. Though we have been briefed beforehand about the spectacle that awaits us — Kam-

fers Dam hosts one of only six breeding sites in the world for the lesser flamingo — nothing has prepared us for the sight of thousands upon thousands of pink birds preening just feet from the train. "I'm covered in goosies!" says the passenger next to me. And once I establish what goosies are (a South African expression for goose bumps), I confirm that I, too, am covered.

Despite the remarkable excursions, the true homage to history is Rovos itself. As our train moves forward to Pretoria, I can't help wanting to stay back in time. So as night falls on our second day and our trip nears its end, I head out to the observation deck, a finely aged Scotch in hand, and revel in the beauty of the ancient stars as a nostalgia for days past welcomingly enfolds me.

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