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This book is dedicated to all my family and friends, past and present.
And to all the fabulous and interesting people I have met on my
travels

Let me start at the beginning of how this trip came to fruition. My brother-in-law Dirk had passed away from cancer and I decided that my sister could do with a change of scenery and South Africa would be a great country to do this.

The choice wasn't too difficult either and why? I had won tickets with the KLM, lucky me! Deciding for Margaret to share my luck.

Why South Africa? Having been there a couple of times, it reminds me of Australia, where I was born, it was also where we had lived as a family for 17 years so why not? It is lot closer, less flying time, no jet lag, no time difference, lots of dangerous animals, snakes and other creepy crawlies like they have in OZ, just perfect, by crikey!

With the help of representatives of diverse travel companies I could put the itinerary together without it costing us an arm or a leg.

Having sorted through quite a few emails with all kinds of offers I finally made the choices necessary for Margaret and my trip to South Africa.

I can go into all kinds of details about the time before we leave, the packing, inoculations, what we had to drink and eat at Schiphol Airport, and so forth, but it seems a waste of paper, so let's get on with what I want to share with you the reader.

Takeoff is always brilliant; I love the power that is unleashed. I still find flying one of the wonders of technology. Every chance I get I will try to get into the air, a balloon, micro light, gyrocopter, or what ever. In the air the world is beautiful, such as the sunrise or sunset, cities lighted up, the clouds are like woolly sheep.

From the window of the plane the wing engine in the sun illuminates, the upper rim of the engine, the lower half several shades darker. As the plane dips beneath the clouds shadow and light move back and forth. Now back to the story I am trying to tell.

It was an uneventful flight to Johannesburg, and as usual the meals or should I say the main dish was a chicken and mash disaster, the The leg room is okay if you are 160 cm tall weighing 45kgs! So called new seats with thinner cushions, very smart people “who never fly economy I suppose”, who designed the seats and the way they measure legroom, but do you have a choice? Nope, only if you can afford business class seats, or pay 320 euro extra for a comfort class seat...

After landing in Johannesburg I took place in a 4 wheeled chariot better known as a wheelchair, so getting through the airport and customs for us was pretty darn quick. Passing through the doors we saw my name on a board held by our driver Vesa who drove us to Pretoria for our one night stay before heading off to Cape Town on-board a train.

I would like to mention that the car we were picked up with was not we expected, one wheel was one of those tiny spare wheels with a yellow rim, 80km per hour maximum speed, so the ride took about 50 minutes, so slow.. We arrived at the Tree Tops Lodge to be met by Jeff the manager who was very welcoming at this late hour 23:45, at 00:00 a knock on the door, there is Jeff with real food, a ham, egg and tomato sandwich which was the best I have ever tasted, which is not difficult because I usually never eat it at midnight.

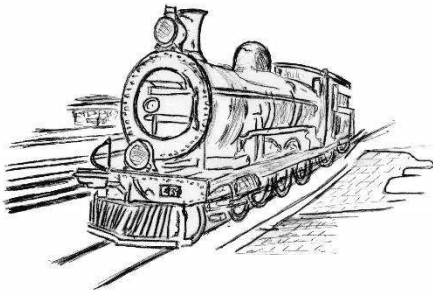
After a good night's sleep, waking up to a clear blue sky with birdsong in the background “what a way to start the day”, we enjoyed a quiet breakfast before we said our goodbye's to Jeff and had Vesa drive us to the Rovos Train Station in Pretoria.

All we could say is Wow; the reception we received was fantastic with very attentive staff taking care of our luggage before taking us into the departure Lounge. From the moment you set foot in the Rovos departure lounge, you are transported to a time that exists now only in books and in the memories we hold of stories passed down to us from generations that have gone before.

Vaulted, high ceilings and plush red carpet leading to the elegantly appointed lounge, where the soothing, somewhat irritating chords of a string quartet float through the air and the sparkle of a glass of champagne or orange juice served on a silver tray welcomes the guest to the Rovos experience. So all we can do is relax and allow ourselves to be transported back in time to an age that we have forgotten. But I suppose that's what being royalty or rich feels like... mmm gets me thinking, King Alfred sounds quite good..

Having about two hours to kill we had a look around outside and were told that this was once a bustling hub of steam locomotion in the old Transvaal is now the headquarters for Rovos Rail. The gracious colonial-style railway station takes you back in time with its opulence, the low, red-bricked buildings alongside the new 300-meter platform house laundries, gleaming stainless-steel kitchens and well-stocked storerooms that need to be if you see what goes on board for the passengers, so much food and drink, as we will find out.

For the enjoyment of the passengers a steam engine is rolled out so that we can see what was used to pull the wagons in the past.



A gleaming green mean machine so well loved, the smell, the sound also takes you back to a more romantic time where time was not an issue, everything was just that bit more relaxed.

The engine is not used anymore and has been replaced for a diesel engine being more reliable, less polluting but so mundane, steam seems more fitting, but alas.

As the steam engine pulls away our “Hotel on Wheels”, pulls into the station, it is then that we realize this will be home for the next 48 hours, damn we are so lucky to be able to go on this train all thanks to Beatrice, from Rovos who I met at a South Africa Road show in Amsterdam. She arranged it for us for a price that we could afford because never in a million years could we afford it.

After an introduction by Rohan Vos, “the big boss of Rovos”, going into detail about how Rovos came about, starting in 1986 with a letter of permission, just look at it now, how it has grown into a South African icon. It’s time to get on-board to meet our hostess Tracy, who showed us to our Deluxe Suite and it surely was. Wood panelling, a small writing desk, really comfy beds, air-conditioning, en –suite bathroom with everything you need, even a hairdryer. There is also a bar fridge filled with what you like and not forgetting 24 hour room service. Luxury from a bygone era.

Slowly we depart from the station all ready for a new experience. A 1600 kilometre journey through the grasslands of the gold rich Highveld to the stark and desolate Great Karoo, passing through valleys flanked by spectacular mountain ranges before reaching the wine lands that surround the Cape.

But what do I hear? The bells? No, not the bells of the hunchback of the Notre Dame, but a call to high tea! Common Margaret time to see what is on offer and stuff our faces with sweet delights, the choices available, chocolate, fruit and cream tarts, sandwiches, the finest chocolates all served with tea or coffee, but if you prefer with something stronger.

How many kilo’s can you put on is amazing in such a relatively short time, breakfast, lunch, high tea and dinner, snacks during the hours between meals, drinks all kinds of wine, liqueurs, distilled, beers, ciders the list just goes on, life is hard...

Dragging ourselves away, we return to our suite to get ready for dinner at 19:30. So strange taking a shower on a moving train as it shakes, rattles and rolls, quite an experience. Having been told that there is a dress code for dinner we have both taken clothing appropriate with us for the occasion. Sounds pretty snobby don't it.

Margaret in a long dress, and me with a dinner jacket and tie, all colour coded of course.. Just in time I can hear the bell calling us to dinner. Walking while the train is moving it is like walking on a ship that rolls in the waves, thank heavens the aisles are pretty small, so that falling to the right or left is out of the question, also if you are drunk no one notices...

We are seated with a great Australian couple Gordon a farmer and Lyn a retired Flying Doctors, nurse, with whom we hit off with quite well, chatting about their life in OZ and our life there as well, the highs and lows with everything in-between.

We enjoyed a magnificent meal that seemed to appear from invisible kitchens 4 courses that are sumptuously stretched out into the late evening, accompanied with wines that compliment each course. We are left wondering how the waiters deliver us such amazing meals from the confines and restrictions of the trains kitchens I think that sorcery or magic is at play here.

With the evening coming, to an end time for a nightcap before we retire to our suite for a good night's sleep. The suite was rearranged; the beds were made, on the cushion a chocolate. The sandman arrived on time, rocked to sleep by the rhythmical motion of the train.

Waking up to see endless cloudless blue skies makes you smile watching the vast expanse of the countryside glide by. Time for a morning cuppa before getting ready for breakfast which is at your own leisure.

After breakfast we arrive at our first stop Kimberley, known for its famous diamond mine "The Big Hole", and no it is not the kind of hole you are thinking of.. The site holds the title of largest man-made excavation in the world and features a cavernous hole of 214 meters from which over 2722 kilos of diamonds have been extracted.

More would be explained by our guide Scotty a Glaswegian import who arrived in South Africa 35 years ago who could also do with a shave, I know that's beside the point for someone with so much knowledge about the Geology of the Kimberley.

It was a shame that time is limited, so the visit to the museum was rushed as was the visit to the surrounding buildings from a time that men were men. A timetable is a timetable and must be met so back to the station where we were greeted by the staff with champagne and or orange juice, before boarding. Talk about first class service by the staff!

After an opulent lunch it was time to write some postcards, but due to the movement of the train I was quick to put that idée aside after the 4th card I didn't want to look like I was drunk at the time I was writing them, because one thing I can tell you the ride on the train wasn't that smooth, if you know what I mean.

Having time to kill, I decided to put pen to paper and started a log about this trip, perfect and readable was not of the essence as long as I could read it without too much difficulty, which at times trying to decipher my own handwriting was like trying to translate hieroglyphs.

Ah the bells calling us to high tea, which we could and would not miss, too delicious to let it pass us by.

After high tea back to "Fred's place", at least that's what Gordon calls it. Fred's place is the smoking lounge the name is due to it being used primarily by yours truly, the name was adopted by other passengers as well and would stay so until we disembarked at Cape Town.

How time flies, dinner time is nearly upon us, putting on my doodads, tie, jacket, etc. and Margaret puts on her makeup doing her hair, wearing another stunning dress, off we go to feast upon what is on offer, in other words 4 courses accompanied with wines that complimented each course, so unhealthy but who gives a f..k, live is for living at least for now.