

STEEL WHEELS ACROSS AFRICA

TURN BACK THE HANDS OF TIME
AND EXPERIENCE THE ORIGINAL
OVERLAND SAFARI.

GARY **KRAMER**

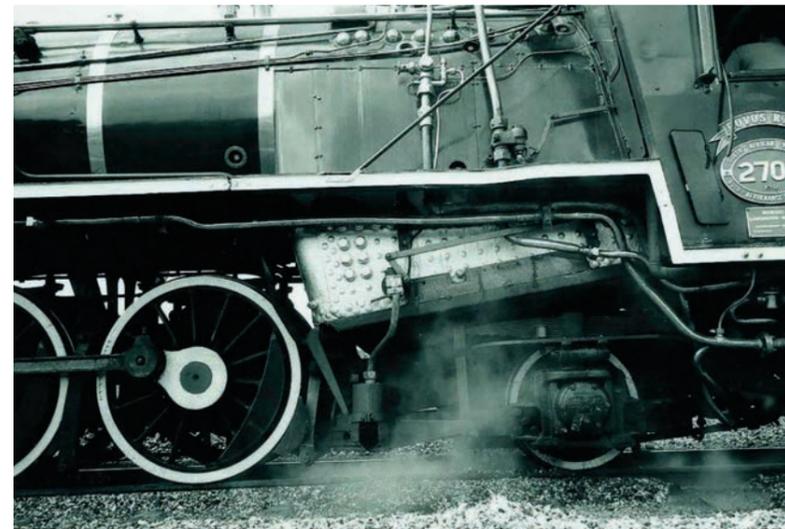
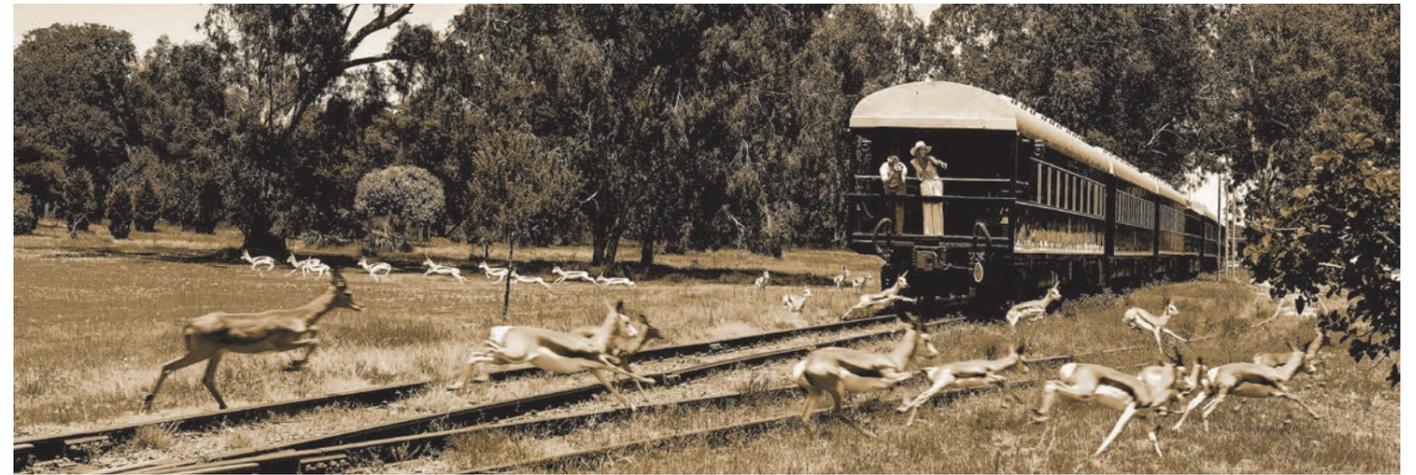
PRIDE OF AFRICA



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Traveling across the continent, guests enjoy Africa and its splendors including grasslands, mountain ranges, and, of course, wild game.

STAND ON THE rear of the open observation car and watch the twin steel rails disappear into the vastness of Africa. Allow yourself a moment of make-believe—half close your eyes and it is easy to envision what this continent must have been like 100 years ago. Golden grass spanning from horizon to horizon, the late afternoon sun filtering through the thin, verdant acacia leaves and glinting off the fuzzy, gray, ear-shaped seed pods. A kudu lifts his head from feeding, barks, throws his spiral horns along his back and in one bound disappears into the bush, while thousands of pounds of steel roll past. Drink it in—it isn't often a hunting trip allows you to travel back in time.



PHOTOS: ROVOS.COM



A BIT OF THE OLD

The trip began at the Rovos Rail Station in Pretoria, South Africa. Rohan Vos, owner of the Rovos Rail (hence the name: “Ro” “Vos”), greeted the guests and explained the eight-day adventure that was about to unfold. The journey on the Rovos Rail’s “Pride of Africa” train would take us from Pretoria to the bush veldt of the North West province, to the diamond fields of the Northern Cape, to the rich game lands of the Free State, finally returning to the Pretoria Station.

The Rovos Rail’s “Pride of Africa” is a restored 1920s-vintage Edwardian train complete with original dining and observation cars. From the observation car complete with a viewing deck, the dining car with linen-covered tables set with fine china and crystal, and the well-appointed staterooms, each with a private bath, the Rovos Rail is a study in elegance. Add an attentive staff and all the elements are in place for travel on what many consider the most luxurious train in the world.

The Rovos Rail shooting safaris have been in operation since the early 1990s. The concept has been wildly successful, combining luxury train travel that includes exquisite cuisine and the best wines and spirits with world-class bird hunting.

This journey was to be a bit different. It would also include plains game hunting.



Guests step back in time as they enjoy five-star luxury in reconditioned wood-paneled coaches with Edwardian period features.

ALL ABOARD

Recreating a bit of the old English luxury travel experience, when the time came to board, a red carpet showed the way and champagne cocktails were served while our luggage was taken to our staterooms. Soon all we could see was a countryside dominated by golden fields of grain and native bush veldt, and scattered settlements were the vistas from open windows.

Before we changed into dinner attire—jackets and ties for the men, dresses for the ladies—the group gathered in the observation car to get acquainted. Bombay Sapphire and tonic and Glenfiddich appeared to be the cocktails of choice. Dinner started with sumptuous springbok carpaccio on a bed of arugula followed by the main course of Karoo rack of lamb and malva pudding with heavy cream for dessert. Of course, each course was paired with fine South African wine.

To say drifting off to sleep with a full stomach, a nip of Amarula dessert liqueur, and the slight, rhythmic rocking of the train was easy is an understatement.





The Rovos Rail is a study in stately turn-of-the-century elegance. Restored in exacting detail to its original glory, the “Pride of Africa” train follows several historic rail routes to multiple African destinations, including such noted stops as Cape Town, Durban, Pretoria, Kimberley, Victoria Falls, Swakopmund, and Dar es Salaam. While not every excursion offers hunting, all trips combine historic travel routes with cultural and natural stops capturing the essence and majesty of Africa.

Trips vary from short, multi-day excursions to the grandest of them all: a 15 day sojourn (30 days round trip) from Cape Town to Dar es Salaam. All Rovos Rail trips feature formal five-star dining, and exceptional personalized service in well-appointed cars available in three sleeper choices: Pullman, Deluxe, and Royal.





KUDU QUEST

When the train arrived at Kimberley, I was met by our Professional Hunter Frikkie Nieuwoudt and hunters Tom and Will Rogers, who had already been in the field several days and had shot excellent sable, zebra, impala, and eland.

We loaded into the hunting vehicle bound for the Wintershoek Game Reserve, about a 30-minute drive from Kimberley station. Wintershoek covers more than 132,000 acres of open thorn veldt, savannah, semiarid desert, mountains and rocky hills, and both mopane and miombo woodlands—like the train, this country hasn't changed much in the last century.

Will had his sights set on kudu and nyala. Greater kudu are found throughout sub Sahara Africa, reaching their greatest abundance in Botswana, Namibia, Zimbabwe, Zambia, and South Africa. They are likely the single most sought-after species on a plains game safari. Elk-sized and often referred to as the grey ghost, kudu are infamous for sticking close to heavy brush and disappearing as fast as they appear. They are as cagey as a whitetail and sport impressive spiral horns. Anything above 50 inches, measured around the curl, is considered an excellent trophy.

About an hour into the hunt, we saw three kudu bulls slip into a tangle of brush and boulders on a steep hillside. They kept ahead of us for nearly a mile with only fleeting glimpses of the bulls on the move. Frikkie determined that one of the bulls would approach 50 inches. We played hide and seek for another 20 minutes when finally the bull stopped behind a tree, keeping his head and body covered—all that was clear were his ears and spiral horns sticking out.

In what seemed like an eternity, but was probably less than 10 minutes, the bull stepped out at 120 yards. Frikkie put up the shooting sticks, and in one fluid motion, Will set, then steadied the .270, found the kudu's shoulder, and fired. The 130-grain bullet found its mark—the kudu flinched and sprinted 50 yards before he stopped suddenly and fell dead.



MIXED BAG SAFARI

Back at the train that night, we met up with the eight wingshooters who enjoyed an excellent day of driven shooting. They made eight drives and bagged 195 guineas and seven francolin. That's world-class bird action, considering that, unlike Europe where most driven birds are pen-raised, the guineas and francolin here are all wild. The next day the bird hunters had a decoy pigeon shoot and dove action on their docket.

The following morning arrived bright, crisp, and clear. The temperature hovered right around 30 degrees Fahrenheit. After all, it was winter in the Southern Hemisphere, and June and July are the coldest months. Will was looking for a good nyala. Impala, springbok, warthog, and red hartebeest were on my list.

We concentrated our efforts on the thick cover adjacent to savanna. Like kudu, nyala are brush-loving species and have a tendency to use edge areas where the two habitats meet, particularly early and late in the day. It wasn't long before we spotted a solitary nyala bull moving along a hillside about 500 yards away.

The bull was over a rise, and we picked our way up the hillside. It took about 15 minutes to reach the location. The brush was thicker than it had appeared, and it took all of us glassing to locate the nyala. Frikkie saw the glint of a horn, then movement, and said, "There's your bull. He's about 150 yards out."

There was a low opening through the brush, so the sticks were set up to allow a shot from the sitting position. Will's shot was perfect, with the point of impact just behind the shoulder and a little lower than you would aim for a deer. The bull ran only 20 yards before collapsing. It was nice mature bull with ivory tips and a long sleek coat.

Now it was my turn, and I traded my camera for a .270 Winchester Model 70. While I was looking for several species, the ones I wanted the most were a good impala or a warthog. As we cruised the property, we saw warthogs, but they were all too small, and several groups of impala, but no good rams.

By the afternoon the temperature had risen to about 75 degrees, and many of the animals were bedded down in the shade. We hiked to several good vantage points to glass the brush and savanna below. On the third try we found a small herd of impala with one nice ram.

The plan was to make our way down the hill to intercept the herd as they moved toward a waterhole. We hustled to get ahead of them and then waited only seconds before they walked through a patch of brush about 100 yards away. When the ram cleared the brush, Frikkie stopped him with a grunt. I found the ram in the scope, put the crosshairs on his shoulder, and squeezed the trigger. He dropped in his tracks.



WINGS OVER AFRICA

While we were having great luck on plains game, the bird hunters enjoyed phenomenal success as well. They spent two days shooting driven guinea fowl and francolin near Mareetsane and Kameel where farmland was interspersed with native bush veldt.

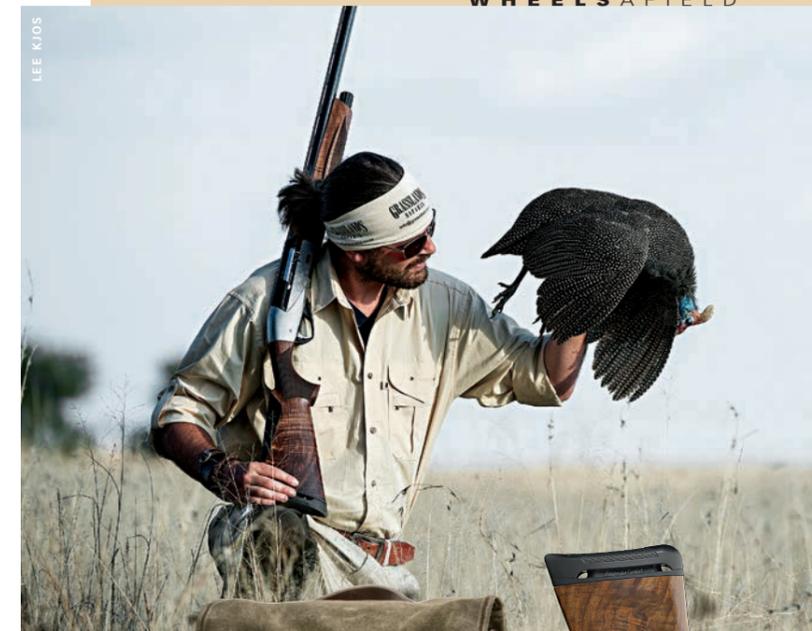
Two days were devoted to dove and pigeons near Bloemfontein—a rich agricultural region where sunflower, corn, and wheat are the primary crops. The best decoy pigeon shoot yielded 570 rock pigeons for seven hunters. A half-day shoot in a sunflower field resulted in 203 doves (Cape, laughing, and red-eyed) along with 130 rock pigeons.

Rounding out the action was a day of waterfowl hunting. The bag for eight hunters was 25 geese, both Egyptian and spur-winged, and 115 ducks, mostly red-billed teal, yellow-billed ducks, and white-faced whistling ducks.

Each day the non-shooters had their own guided program that included visits to Boer War battlefields, art museums, spa visits, shopping, and game drives. The non-shooters joined the hunters in the field for a half-day of shooting and the midday meal, while everyone on board spent a day touring the Diamond Mine Museum and Big Hole in Kimberley.

Whether you prefer wingshooting, plains game hunting, or a history of African culture, when considering luxury trips, an excursion aboard the Rovos Rail is certainly a top contender.

Before we knew it, the train pulled back into the Pretoria station, and I reflected on the journey. World-class shooting, eight days of luxury with exquisite cuisine, five-star accommodations, and unmatched service, it just might be the most incredible trip in the world and definitely gives all aboard a taste of what old Africa must have been like. **W**



IDEAL TOOLS FOR THE JOB

Saddleback Leather MountainBack Backpack

Classic waxed canvas and leather luggage has always been the gold standard for African travel. There used to be countless purveyors of such goods, but unfortunately in modern times, few make true Africa-tough luggage anymore. Luckily for the real adventuring sportsmen (not the bearded hipster needing a glorified tote bag for his trip to a Seattle coffee shop), Saddleback, long-known for its excellent leather luggage, is entering the realm of waxed canvas with its new MountainBack series. It's built as tough as a Cape buff, but comes with Saddleback's famous 100-year warranty, just in case. saddlebackleather.com

Benelli Ethos

Complete luxury and perfection is found on the Rovos Rail—a shotgun that has both should ride the rails as well. The Ethos, a 6.5-pound semiauto with an engraved nickel-plated receiver and satin walnut stock, does more than look good—the Benelli Inertia Driven System makes it ultra reliable, while the Progressive Comfort recoil reduction system keeps your shoulder intact. A two-part carrier latch makes loading smooth and natural, keeping your eyes on flights of birds not on the gun—let the other passengers gawk at the gun. benelliusa.com

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