



Luxury train travel gathering steam

Luxury rail travel is more about the journey than getting to a destination

by Cheryl Mandy

WHILE this sector has predictably experienced a downturn, it had, like cruise travel, been picking up momentum over the last few years, with new routes and trains appearing worldwide but particularly in India, Asia, Africa and Europe.

Benefits of luxury rail travel include privacy, excellent service and lots of luxurious pampering, plus going by rail is a greener travel option. As in the cruise industry, there is also a growing population of fitter, older people with more time and more money to take these journeys.

Business will soon be back on track according to Simon Pielow of Train Chartering based in Wiltshire UK. His business was affected initially, for two main reasons, "The obvious one – there is less disposable income around, and secondly, perhaps less obvious, is a feeling that enjoying luxury is slightly inappropriate at the moment."

"Luckily these two issues will diminish in importance and the benefits of private rail cars and private trains will become more apparent," he said. "The Middle East is an area we will be targeting much more in the future, especially as rail travel is on the planning agenda throughout the region," he said.

Train travel in general recorded an increase in popularity from early 2008 according to the ITB World Travel Trends Report.

Marketing and sales manager Rovos Rail Tours Estee Badenhorst said that they had been "seriously affected" by the global recession but were fortunate not to have had to downscale operations in a major way or to retrench staff. "Our overall turnover is down by approximately 40 per cent to date, versus the same time in 2008."

"We are starting to see some improvement in bookings from 2009 year-end onwards and are hopeful that this signifies the turn in the luxury train travel sector of the market," she said.

Many luxury train companies from all over the

world opt to join the Luxury Train Club, which provides customers information about rail travel ideas and trends. Luxury Train Online is another useful source – it is a travel guide for luxury train tours all around the world. Rail companies including Royal Scotsman, Orient Express Trains, the Blue Train, Trans-Siberian Express Company, Al Andalus Express, Royal Canadian Pacific and The Blue Train are represented with their destinations and tours.

Spectacular luxury journeys include the Glacier Express in Switzerland, considered to be one of the most beautiful yet slowest train journeys in the world. The name Venice Simplon-Orient-Express instantly associates one with mystery novels and films, and there are many options across Europe.

Possibly the best way to see India is from the comfort of a luxury train, and the country has many – the Palace on Wheels is the oldest and most popular, with the Maharajas' Express being India's newest and on schedule to start its first

commercial run on January 9, 2010. The Maharaja's Express has 23 coaches including a presidential suite.

Steam enthusiasts will enjoy trips down memory lane on Rovos Rail, South Africa, and day-trips on the vintage steam engine Cathedral Express taking in England's most beautiful Cathedral cities. Another steam locomotive journey is on the West Highland Line in Scotland from Glasgow to Fort William and Mallaig via Rannoch Moor – part of the journey goes over the Glenfinnan Viaduct which has appeared in Harry Potter films.

Another South African luxury train the Blue Train is offering four nights for free in 2010, available from Luxury Trains and Somak Holidays, the first journey taking off on April 15.

The longest train journey (and possibly the coldest) in the world is the Trans Siberian Railway of Russia, Mongolia and China, which has three main routes. The next 19-day Moscow to Vladivostok from onthegotours.com starts on January 11, 2010. ■



Cape to Cairo by rail, ship and air

by Cheryl Mandy

A 28-day Cape to Cairo luxury adventure using a combination of rail, air and ship transportation is on offer from South Africa's Rovos Rail.

The epic journey starts in Cape Town on January 8, 2010 and includes various tours in South Africa, an overnight stay at the Victoria Falls Hotel in Zimbabwe, a flight to Zanzibar followed by time spent at the Ngorongoro Crater in Tanzania and a tented experience in the Serengeti, then a flight to Entebbe in Uganda for an optional visit to the gorillas in Uganda/Bwindi, after which an aircraft takes guests to Khartoum, Sudan.

After that, guests move to Egypt and take in various options including a three night cruise on Lake Nasser, culminating in Cairo, from where the identical reverse journey departs on January 26, 2010. The aircraft used will be confirmed closer to the time depending upon availability and passenger complement.

A more accessible choice for discerning travellers with less time on their hands is Rovos Rail's Pride of Africa partial steam train journeys lasting from 24 hours to two weeks. The longest journey takes 14 days and runs from Cape Town to Dar-es-Salaam via Botswana, Zimbabwe and Zambia three times a year in January, July and September. A reverse journey is also available.

The company, formed by Rohan Vos in 1989, had the specific aim of taking passengers back to an era when train travel was for the privileged to experience Africa swaddled in luxury and elegance and enhanced by five-star dining. Its wood panelled coaches from the old days have been remodeled and refurbished to luxurious high standards, and carry a maximum of 72 passengers in 36 suites. The trains are hauled by steam, diesel or electric locomotives, headquartered in Capital Park Station, Pretoria, a once derelict locomotive yard that is now a gracious colonial-style railway station. *TTN* took a two-night three-day Victoria Falls to Pretoria trip to see what all the excitement was about. First though, we had to see one of the most spectacular seven natural wonders of the world – then from just outside the Victoria Falls Hotel in a dedicated area it was all aboard.....

We snaked through Hwange National Park, Zimbabwe's largest game reserve spotting an elephant or two en route, rumbled through Thomson's Junction, into Bulawayo, Plumtree (where border formalities for passengers consist of slumbering on while Rovos staff do the necessary) and into neighbouring Botswana. Just outside Francistown to the north east guests get a chance to stop at the 12,000 hectare Wayside game and cattle ranch belonging to Rowland Munger (also owner of the country's most famous champion prize bull named

Cappuccino), who gives an interesting insight into the Botswana farming industry as well as a sumptuous morning tea of local fare.

We crossed the Tropic of Capricorn just before Gaborone, then headed towards the historic border town of Mafikeng, Zeerust, the Magaliesburg and finally into Pretoria.

Our carriage Umfolozi – all are named after historical figures and areas of South Africa – was a double suite with all the luxurious trimmings one could wish for. Wooden shutters and panels from the old days mould well with the modern luxuries of an enormous bed, fat comfy duvets, power points for recharging today's essentials we cannot seem to do without (mobile phones are banned anywhere other than the rooms, a fabulous idea), hot shower, mini fridge, hair dryer and tea and coffee making facilities. The helpful yet unobtrusive staff seemed to take pleasure in working for Rovos Rail, a good sign, with dedicated hosts taking care of each guest.

The menu is equal to that of any international five-star restaurant, with three course meals served in delicate manageable portions sometimes garnished with beautiful edible flowers and always washed down with a limitless supply of South Africa's best wines.

Verdict? A once-in-a-lifetime luxury travel experience like nothing else – ideal for special occasions or even simply just because you can. ■