SOUTHERN & EAST AFRICAN
TOURISM UPDATE
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Luxury travel

Rovos Rail rolls out the Malawi Meander

Albida Victoria Falls – new, all-inclusive villas

Elegance and charm in Swakopmund

High tea in Cape Town

Flights can simplify safaris



Photo: Adobe Stock

Luxury travel

Luxury travel in Southern Africa is finding fresh expression through new destinations and experiences that invite guests to linger. Well-heeled travellers will find a combination of discovery, indulgence and thoughtful hospitality.

Bringing the Malawi Meander to life

Sue van Winsen

IN 2019, Rovos Rail owner **Rohan Vos** and company historian **Nicholas Coffield** set out to answer an ambitious question: could they build a rail journey to Malawi?

Their reconnaissance was not undertaken from the comfort of a luxury train. They travelled by road, local trains and air, piecing together a route through a part of Southern Africa that Rovos had not previously traversed.

Seven years later, the result is the Malawi Meander – a 16-night, 3 600km journey across South Africa, Eswatini, Mozambique, Zimbabwe and Malawi. Its first commercial departure is scheduled for April 2027.

Getting from that first recce to a bookable itinerary has meant solving an intricate puzzle involving railway infrastructure, operating permissions, border crossings, fuel and water, food supplies, security and excursions.

The start

"Starting a new route or any of our journeys is a very big task for our whole operations team," said **Shyan Mbav**, Reservations & Operations Consultant at Rovos Rail.

One of the first considerations is whether Rovos's rolling stock can physically operate on the railway infrastructure along a proposed route.

"Some railway lines use different brake systems. They use different railway systems. Some are more technologically advanced," said Mbav.

"The railway line actually guides us when doing a new route because we see where the tracks are. From there, we identify cities where we can stop for excursions for the guests as well as where we can restock diesel for our locomotives, water for the train, as well as supplies for the food and beverage team," Mbav said, adding that security was a consideration too.

Flexibility

Vos had long wanted to reach Malawi by rail, but plans were interrupted by the pandemic. During this time, the management of the Malawian railway concession also changed.

Rovos is still working towards securing permission for its own train to operate on the Malawian network. In the meantime, the company has found another way to complete the journey.

The train travels as far as Moatize in Mozambique. Guests then leave the train and transfer to Tete's Chingozi Airport for a flight to Makokola Retreat on Lake Malawi. From there, the journey continues by road to Liwonde National Park before a flight takes guests to Lilongwe.



Shyan Mbav

Making it look easy

Once the route is workable, another challenge begins – delivering the experience on board.

Rovos currently works with 266 menus across its train operations.



The Malawi Meander will pass through a variety of terrain. Credit: Scott Monaco



Planning a journey like this involved major logistical challenges.
Credit: Scott Monaco

On some of its extended operations, where a train can be away for around 70 days while operating different journeys, provisioning can involve quantities such as 5 000 eggs and 800kg of fillet.

Then there is everything from linen and soft furnishings to the precise packing required to fit what is needed on board.

The test

In May and June, Rovos tested the Malawi Meander with 16 invited repeat guests aboard a 13-coach train.

For the first time, Rovos travelled beyond Maputo into Mozambique, reaching Beira and Moatize, and beyond Bulawayo to Harare and Mutare.

"It was an adventure. We faced the unknown," said Mbav. "No one really knew what to expect."

The trial showed that not every detail of a new journey can be worked out beforehand.

When the train arrived in Harare, the team was unfamiliar with the destination Mbav said. They headed into the city with the company's historian and asked local residents what visitors should see.

That led them to Chapungu Sculpture Gallery, where an excursion expected to take ten minutes turned into a two-and-a-half-hour visit, including conversations with some of the sculptors.

The experience helped shape the Harare component of the itinerary, which now includes visits to local galleries and a street market.

Another highlight came as the train crossed Mozambique's 3.67km Dona Ana Bridge over the Zambezi at sunset. "Everyone was on the observation car taking videos and pictures," said Mbav.

The successful trial confirmed the format Rovos will use when commercial Malawi Meander journeys begin next year.

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FedAir simplifies safari connections

CREATING the perfect itinerary for a family or a group travelling across Southern Africa often means balancing different destinations and travel preferences while ensuring the group gets to make the most of their Africa trip.

Federal Airlines (FedAir) offers a dynamic fleet and an extensive safari network designed to accommodate different group sizes, travel styles and itineraries.

Rather than building an itinerary around lengthy road transfers, the tour operator or agent can ensure that their clients spend more of their holiday experiencing the destinations.

"For group travel, flexibility is everything. Our fleet allows travel designers to build itineraries around the guest, rather than the other way around," says **Nicole Schickerling**, Commercial General Manager – Shuttle at FedAir.

The airline's connections from key gateways, including OR Tambo International Airport, Kruger Mpumalanga International Airport, Hoedspruit and Skukuza, mean that travellers can access some of the Lowveld's most sought-after safari regions.



Nicole Schickerling

FedAir also connects guests to destinations including Madikwe, Marataba and Phinda, opening up greater possibilities for multi-destination itineraries.

A group might begin in the Sabi Sands before continuing to the Timbavati, while another could combine the Greater Kruger with Madikwe or Phinda.

With FedAir, these multi-lodge itineraries are more achievable, reducing road travel and creating more opportunities to experience the diversity of South Africa.

For groups needing an even more tailored experience, FedAir offers a private charter service based on the client's specific requirements.



FedAir connects travellers from OR Tambo International Airport to some of the Lowveld's most popular safari destinations.
Source: FedAir

"Every hour saved in transit gives guests more time to enjoy their safari. That is particularly valuable for international travellers who want to experience as much of South Africa as possible within a limited number of days," says Schickerling.

FedAir's dynamic fleet further supports this approach, with aircraft suited to different group requirements and destinations.

"It's about making the most of the time guests have in Africa, connecting them to more places, with less time spent getting between them," says Schickerling.



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LEGACY

Welcome to Albida – Victoria Falls

VICTORIA Falls Safari Collection, operated by Africa Albida Tourism, has officially opened Albida – Victoria Falls, its newest all-inclusive boutique lodge.

Since its September opening, the lodge reports feedback commending its accommodation, personalised service, dining and overall guest experience.

It is just four kilometres from the Victoria Falls and comprises 13 private villas, including 10 Deluxe Villas and three Family Villas. Each features generous living spaces, a private terrace and plunge pool.

The lodge has a sweeping patio and deck overlooking an exclusive waterhole. The dining room extends on to the deck and down to a secluded fire-pit, creating an intimate setting for alfresco dining and spectacular sunsets.

The all-inclusive offering includes accommodation, meals, beverages, laundry, guided access to the Falls and specially selected experiences which include game drives, Zambezi river cruises, helicopter flights over the Falls, spa treatments, guided walks and a full-day trip to Chobe National Park.



All 13 villas at Albida – Victoria Falls feature a private terrace and plunge pool.
Source: Victoria Falls Safari Collection

"Since opening our doors, the response from both guests and our travel trade partners has been extremely encouraging," says **Anald Musonza**, Sales and Marketing Director of Africa Albida Tourism.

"Albida – Victoria Falls was created to offer something distinctive in Victoria Falls; a private and personalised experience that combines beautiful accommodation, attentive service and the incredible experiences that make this destination so special. It has been wonderful to see the concept come to life and to hear how positively it has been received."

Ross Kennedy, Director of Africa Albida Tourism, adds: "Albida represents an important new chapter for the Victoria Falls Safari Collection. It responds to the growing demand for private accommodation in Victoria Falls while offering guests a genuine sense of place and a highly personalised experience."

Albida – Victoria Falls adds to the Collection's offering in the area. This includes Victoria Falls Safari Lodge, Victoria Falls Safari Club, Victoria Falls Safari Suites, Lokuthula Lodges, The Boma – Dinner & Drum Show, Victoria Falls Safari Spa and Queen Nandi Place (a dedicated MICE venue catering for upmarket events).

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TU26D2979S

High tea in Cape Town

Claire Morrison

WHAT could be more luxurious than high tea? High tea in Cape Town, of course, where some of the city's finest hotels couple spectacular settings with mouthwatering treats.

The Twelve Apostles

The Twelve Apostles Hotel and Spa serves its Tea by the Sea experience in the Leopard Bar Lounge, overlooking the scenic cove of Oudekraal, the Twelve Apostles mountain range and the Atlantic Ocean.

"Our High Tea celebrates Cape Town through distinctly local flavours and ingredients, with creations such as Bobotie Quiche, Cape Malay Milk Tart and fynbos-infused mousse. The menu evolves seasonally, while remaining proudly rooted in local produce and flavours" says Head Pastry Chef **Gina Marziani**.



Tea by the Sea in the Leopard Bar at The Twelve Apostles Hotel and Spa. Source: The Twelve Apostles Hotel and Spa

Mount Nelson

Afternoon tea at Mount Nelson combines an elegant setting with an extensive tea selection and a menu inspired by South African flavours.

A dedicated tea sommelier, **Craig Cupido**, is available on most days to guide guests through a collection of more than 60 teas from around the world. Other offerings include tea-tasting experiences with food pairings, tea masterclasses and traditional tea ceremonies.

The cuisine has a distinctly South African spin, says Pastry Chef, **Vicky Gurovich**.

"Rather than recreating familiar South African favourites too literally, the pastry team takes a flavour pairing, a distinctive ingredient or a nostalgic reference and reinterprets it through refined pâtisserie. The result is contemporary and elegant, while still carrying a strong sense of place and a story that guests can connect with."



Guests enjoying high tea on the terrace of La Residence. Source: The Royal Portfolio

Cape Grace

Afternoon tea at the Cape Grace Hotel is served in The Heirloom Restaurant.

The hotel's latest tea offering: 'Where the Mountain Meets the Meadow', draws on Pastry Chef **Willem Verwey's** childhood memories.

The journey begins with canapés including crayfish and buchu, springbok and beetroot, and goat's cheese and asparagus, followed by finger sandwiches and freshly baked scones.

The narrative continues through the selection of teas. Guests can explore everything from classic black teas and delicate green and white teas, to oolong and herbal infusions. The Cape Grace Exclusive Blend offers a particularly personal flavour: rooibos, spices, herbs and fruits come together in a blend created especially for the hotel.

La Residence

Set among the vineyards and mountains of Franschhoek, La Residence offers a secluded take on luxury afternoon tea, away from the bustle of Cape Town.

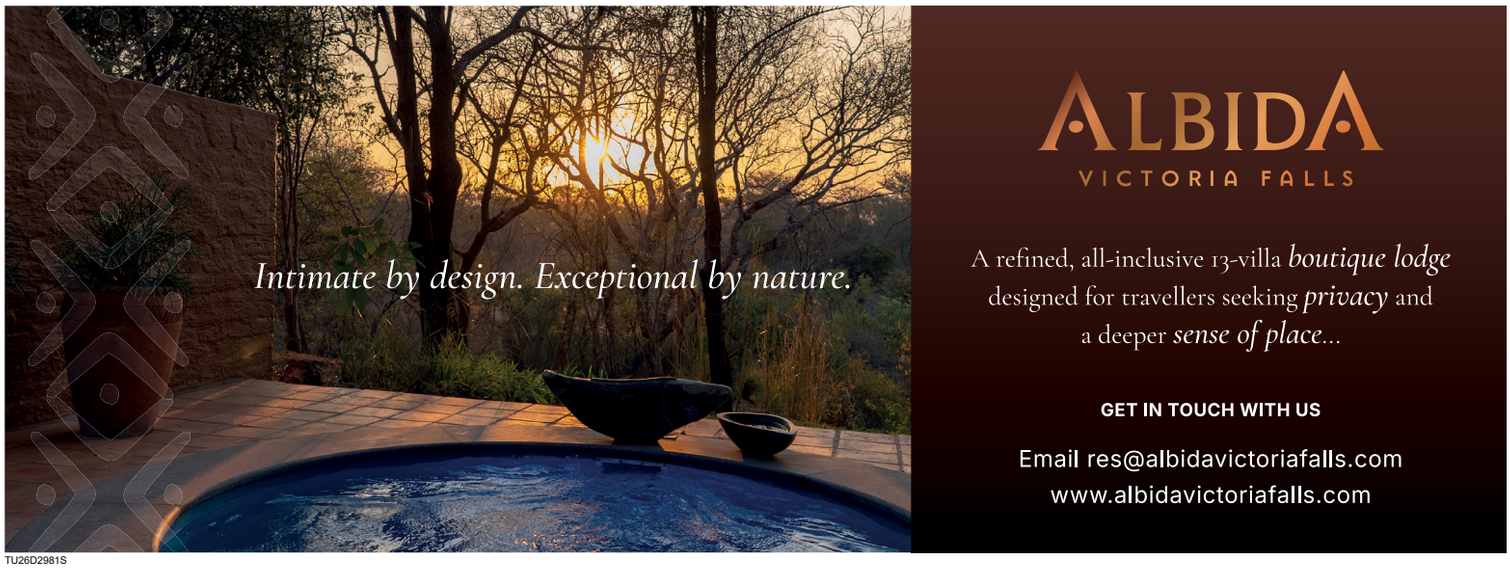
The menu varies according to the season and is crafted with fresh and local produce.

Guests can choose to enjoy their high tea in the Tea House, in the Great Hall or outside on the terraced Loggia, with a view of the mountains.

The Silo Hotel

Situated at the V&A Waterfront, the Silo Hotel offers a distinctly urban take on luxury afternoon tea.

Served as Royal Tea at the Granary Café on the sixth floor, the experience features an assortment of petits gâteaux and sweet and savoury treats. Floor-to-ceiling windows set into the building's distinctive pillowed-glass façade frame gorgeous views of Table Mountain, Signal Hill and the Atlantic Ocean, bringing Cape Town's cityscape into the room.



TU26D2981S

Historic charm in Swakopmund

Tourism Update's ***Kate Nathan*** *was invited as the guest of Legacy Hotels to the Swakopmund Hotel.*



Legacy's Swakopmund Hotel was built in 1901. It is elegant and stately with luxurious touches.

LEGACY'S Swakopmund Hotel has a unique, old-world appeal of its own.

Built in 1901 during the European 'Belle Epoque' age, which was also the German colonial era, the building was the Swakopmund Station. Its purpose was to connect the town of Swakopmund, the main harbour of the German Colony, with the rest of the country, then known as South West Africa. (The neighbouring, natural deepwater harbour at Walvis Bay belonged to the British.)

Subsequently, with painstaking and careful restoration, it was converted to a hotel and remains Swakopmund's most recognisable and elegant landmark, a grand memento of a forgotten era.

Now, 125 years later, it is proudly a Legacy hotel and a tranquil, green oasis for travellers. The property is well known for its genuine, warm hospitality, excellent cuisine and a sophisticated level of comfort.

The rooms, all equipped with mini-bars, are bright and spacious and most have a view of the Pool Terrace. All rooms are air-conditioned and have Wi-fi, DStv and tea/coffee-making facilities.

The property houses the Entertainment Centre, home to the Mermaid Casino.

The hotel is the perfect spot for a weekend getaway from Johannesburg and, aside from pure relaxation in the tranquillity of the lush green grounds and the pool area, there is plenty to do around Swakopmund.

There's a good variety of curated experiences available in the surrounding areas. A must-do is a motorised half-day catamaran ride along the Walvis Bay lagoon, in my case provided by Namibian Charters www.namibiancharters.com. The natural history of the lagoon was superbly narrated by **Vaughn Powell**, with his expert knowledge on the lives of the Cape Fur seals, Great White pelicans (examples of both boarded the catamaran during the tour) and the other wildlife. The tour included a light champagne and oyster lunch, the oysters being the real article – Namibia Atlantic oysters.

Quad biking amid the dunes is a favourite pastime for hotel guests and this can be arranged by a number of providers. One such is Namibia Desert Explorers. The company also provides camel rides, sandboarding, dolphin cruises, desert tours, kayaking, skydiving and scenic flights. www.namibiadesertexplorers.com



Namaqua Chameleon, the only desert-dwelling chameleon in the world. Source: Pixabay



A Great White Pelican onboard the catamaran during the lagoon tour. Source: Kate Nathan



Welwitschia Mirabilis. Source: Pexels, Rino Adamo



Quadbiking in the dunes is a popular attraction for groups. Source: Leonie Bezuidenhout

A three-hour Living Desert Tour is a quintessentially Namibian experience, revealing surprise after surprise. There is prodigious life (much of it very small) just under the surface of the bare, hot sand dunes and, with the help of a good guide, the wildlife and plant life are revealed. Swakopmund's famous morning Atlantic fog is what sustains much of the desert's life. Palmato geckoes, Sand-diving lizards, Sidewinder snakes (Peringuey's adder), Black scorpions, White Dancing Lady spiders, Namaqua chameleons and many other creatures might be found on a half-day tour. The famous Fog-basking beetle (a member of the Tok-tokkie beetle family) is present in the dunes. The Atlantic fog condenses on the beetle's back and rolls down its body into its mouthparts. This is a once-in-a-lifetime tour unlike any other. www.livingdeserttours.com.na

Walvis Bay Miracle Tours has a five-hour tour incorporating the Moon Valley Mountains, lunch served at the natural oasis Goanikontes and a viewing of the Welwitschia Mirabilis, an icon of Namibia, a plant whose stem is under the sand with only its two leathery leaves above ground – it's one of the oldest plants on Earth. www.wbmiracletours.com

What a $3 000-a-night safari actually buys

Claire Morrison

ON PAPER a guest paying US$600 a night and a guest paying more than US$3 000 a night in the same safari reserve will have a close-to identical day. Two game drives, a bush walk, all meals and drinks included, and the same wildlife crossing the same ground. And yet one of them pays five times more.

What differentiates the two?

As more capital moves into the sector and more lodges open at the top luxury end, the gap between a good and an exceptional safari experience is getting harder to spot from a website.

"There are so many five-star lodges and hotels out there, and all of them looking amazing online. The difference isn't something you can tell just by reading the marketing material. You have to experience it," says **Sam Wenger**, founder of the Africa Guide and Refined Routes.

Rates reflect a combination of factors including location and traversing rights, guide and tracker experience, guest-to-staff ratios, staff retention and training depth, and how much of the experience is designed rather than standard. Two lodges offering identical printed inclusions can differ enormously in how each one delivers those inclusions.

Experiences win

Wenger argues that much of the safari industry is still competing on the wrong terms, adding plunge pools, wine cellars, gyms and square metreage in the belief that more will justify the rate.

"Most lodges are still asking what they can add," he says. "The better question is what they can notice about the guest standing in front of them."

Wenger points to a January Flywire survey of luxury travellers that found that 93% agree luxury travel is less about the most exclusive accommodation and more about a personalised experience.



Sam Wenger

Three factors

Real luxury is cultivated through the certainty of the product, the initiative of the staff, and the longevity of the team, says Wenger.

He believes that there are three factors that differentiate a good safari experience from a great one, and none of them appears on a rate sheet.

The first is certainty. "At the top of the market, you are not paying for the possibility of a great safari; you are paying for the near-elimination of the bad day. The vehicle is not full, the guide has been there for years, the kitchen does not close, and when something goes wrong it has usually been solved before the guest notices anything at all."



Source: Pexels

He notes that established safari brands can command their rates because what guests are really buying is certainty.

And the right travel agent provides certainty by matching the client with the right accommodation.

"Anyone can book a room," he says. "The difference is whether the person booking it understands hospitality well enough to hear what the client is not saying, and to match that client with the right property. That's the entire job."

The second is the guest being known rather than being asked.

"Guests at this level are not interrogated about their preferences at every turn. They are read, remembered and quietly looked after, which is a fundamentally different feeling from good service delivered on request.

"Nobody asks how they take their coffee on the second morning of the drive, because the guide will remember. Dietary requirements do not have to be repeated at every meal. Laundry comes back without being chased, and by turndown housekeeping already knows whether the curtains should be left open to the bush or closed for the night."

The third factor crucial to real luxury is having a team that has been in place long enough to notice things. This is the only part of the equation that money cannot shortcut. It must be built, but only by keeping people around long enough for it to happen.

"You can spend a fortune and open the most beautiful lodge in Africa next season, and you can hire excellent people to run it from day one," says Wenger. "What you cannot buy is a team that has worked together long enough to move as one, where the tracker, the waiter and the kitchen are all reading the same guest without needing to discuss it. That only comes with time." ■



Staff are familiar with guests' preferences at Sossusvlei Desert Lodge, says Wenger.
Source: &Beyond Sossusvlei Desert Lodge

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