



# FIVE-STAR *Luxury* ON THE TRACK



*Experiencing The Blue Train is undoubtedly included as an ultimate in most discerning travellers' bucket list. Business executive Septi M Bukula narrates his experience aboard the train that has ferried kings and presidents and which has been synonymous with luxury rail tourism and leisure since 1946.*

As evening falls my mood couldn't be more sombre. All day the skies had opened, releasing a down pour so heavy one could hardly see Cape Town's skyline or take in the city's legendary beauty. My wife and I specially flew down here for what was to be one of our most exciting travel experiences the next day. And now this deluge. With this inclement weather what would we be able to see the next day?

The conversation at the back of the meter-taxi is unmistakably down-spirited. As we approach our hotel, we ask the driver to pick us up the following morning and drop us off at the train station.

"You're going back by train?" he enquires, recalling that a short while ago we told him we arrived here this morning by air. "Yes, The Blue Train", we respond in a rather low-key tone. "Wow, that train is for boss", he offered, drawing instant laughter from us that, for a moment, conquers our grumpy mood. The following morning couldn't have been more different. Bright blue sky, no trace of either clouds or rain, and the soul-pleasing Cape Town scenery in full display. Thank heavens for answered prayer! The stage is set for what we hope will be a great experience.

"Dad, I really want you to kick back and chill a bit. Take loads of pictures", instructs our youngest daughter by text, well aware of how her dad can be too pre-occupied with the pressures of the moment.

As soon as we step into The Blue Train's comfortable guest lounge, having surrendered our luggage to well-organised and friendly staff on arrival, the enthusiastic welcoming and immediate hospitality is invitation enough to relax.

On board the train, time stands still. This train is in no hurry to get anywhere. The 1 600 kilometre (994 mile) stretch from Cape Town to the nation's capital, Pretoria, takes 27 hours, punctuated by several slowdowns or complete stops. At top speed, you're still moving at only 90km/h, giving endless opportunities to feast your senses on Southern Africa's most breath-taking scenery.

At these speeds, every passing shrub; every rugged hill peeping inquisitively behind the trees; every spring in the valley; every quaint and lone structure; every blooming plant; every small village; every bird gliding effortlessly under the smiling African sky; every desert plain; every road

meandering gracefully and hugging the foot of an imposing, snow-capped mountain – along this journey even the most mundane is transformed into a treasure to behold – and enjoy.

With work deadlines looming within just days, I couldn't be bothered. This is The Blue Train, a rare moment to savour.

"Send a shot of the view from your room please, across the African plains, so that normal people can see how the super-rich live", demands a friend back in Johannesburg. Well, not quite for the "super-rich" – The Blue Train experience is really a must-do for all. Anyway, I interrupt myself. As though to say "with the greatest of pleasure", the breath-takingly beautiful Hex River Valley immediately delivers one splendid photo opportunity after another. And the driver obliges, slowing the 399-meter-long, 19-carriage train almost to a standstill.

Taking full advantage of large windows both inside the suite and along the entire side of the train, opening up spectacular panoramic views of the passing countryside, and the train's slow speed, we put our cameras into full action. Text messages with pictures of some of the most outstanding scenery on Earth go out non-stop, drawing admiration from family and friends and an unexpected expression of repentance from the not-so-long-ago curious demander of photos: "Please Lord forgive my jealousy of my brother and sister", comes his prayerfully envious response.

With well over 100 photos taken, it's time to take it easy and enjoy the ride. What better place to do so than right at the back of the train, in the observation car? With a 180-degree view, this is our favoured relaxation spot. Luxury and comfort come standard everywhere on the train. And so does endless hospitality. "At The Blue Train your word is our command", the Train Manager, who earlier stepped into our suite to welcome us aboard, had proudly introduced his "Palace on Wheels". Evidence of his promise is everywhere to find. A professionally-trained butler is on call, and his open face says 'it's my delight to serve you'. The ambience adds something unique to the experience. The highly stylised designs of the suites reflect scenes from the journey, from Table Mountain to windmills in the Karoo, from Kimberley diamonds, to waves pounding the Cape Town shores. Gold-leafed and brass wall sconces emit the suite's soft, incandescent light. Bathroom floors and vanity spaces laid in rare Italian marble, and all fittings plated in 24 carat gold, add to the ambience of sheer luxury and relaxation.



With so much beauty outside and all the on-board comfort to enjoy, one can be forgiven for failing to notice that time is passing by and energy levels are dropping. But, then, one cannot ignore the demands of nature indefinitely. So it's time to head for the Dining Car, where yet another experience awaits.

Guests are treated to typically South African fare, a showcase of the country's fresh, varied cuisine and fine wines, with all palates and special dietary requirements (special meals by advance arrangement) catered for. While enjoying world-class cuisine one feels in the presence of the great and mighty as smartly-dressed and jocular butlers tell tales of celebrities, royalty, magnates and top politicians who've been here before. Of course, no story and visible sense of fondness in telling it, tops that about the presence, not once, of two much loved past guests – the most admired Nelson Mandela and the affable Arch, Desmond Tutu. The sense of delight on the narrator's face might deceive you into believing the two honourable gentlemen are right here, right now.

Sumptuous dining on The Blue Train, complete with a strictly formal dress code during dinner (which drew much protest from the unflinchingly casual me before the trip but great delight from my wife who sometimes voices strong disapproval over my preference for a casual dress code) is indeed a never to be forgotten, social occasion.

With so much to enjoy, nightfall seems to come way too soon. But no worries. It's time to cast your rather well-fed (breakfast, lunch, high tea, dinner, and drinks-on-call – whew!) and rest-appreciative body on that comfortable couch-by-day, turned into an inviting bed by night. Sweet dreams. You will need all the energy for the next day as the rhythm continues unabated, with much more to enjoy, until you reach your destination on the other side of the journey. Oh, not to forget those must-do excursions along the way, already



Among its many on-board facilities, **The Blue Train** offers a conference facility with a 22-delegate capacity, complete with technical support, photocopying and fax (by arrangement only). In partnership with other well established South African brands, The Blue Train also offers exciting packages to places such as the Pilanesberg National Park, Sabie, Hoedspruit, and to the northern coast of KwaZulu-Natal. Special charters are also available, offering experiences such as golfing or safari adventures. **For more information, visit [www.bluetrain.co.za](http://www.bluetrain.co.za).**

included in your fare. Southbound for Cape Town, off-the-train excursion in Kimberley is your opportunity to explore the Big Hole and Diamond Museum. En route to Pretoria the historical town of Matjiesfontein – never heard of it? – will delight you with Victorian buildings, original 19th century London lampposts, and much more. Think you've done it all? If you haven't been on The Blue Train yet you owe yourself South African travel like you've never experienced before. Truly "A Window to the Soul of South Africa". Why is The Blue Train not in the 501 Must-Visit Destinations? I protest.

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