

THE RHODESIA EXPRESS

I love long-distance train travel. It's a little like looking through your hotel window and seeing ever-changing scenery flow past. At the beginning and end of each day, nature paints beautiful sunrises and sunsets. A yellow moon on the horizon or a silver moon high in the night sky embellishes the darkness.

The Cape Town to Bulawayo train journey was the earliest I can clearly remember. The Rhodesia Express's departure from Cape Town was timed to link with the Union Castle Liner's arrival from Southampton in England. As I recall, it was a two-night trip on the train. I was nine years old and travelling with my mother.

The beautiful scenery embracing Cape Town and its hinterland soon passed. Fortunately, the night took up much of the Karoo semi-desert, a flat, featureless landscape given over to sparsely populated sheep farms. Things became more interesting as we approached Kimberley, famous for its diamonds and the big hole—one of the deepest excavations made by man. But we missed it because we passed through on our way to Rhodesia and didn't stop for sightseeing.

For a nine-year-old boy, the scenery wasn't too interesting. But the train held an interest of its own. It made up for the lack of spectacular views.

A steward woke us with an early morning cup of tea or coffee. Mid-morning and afternoon tea were also served in the compartment. A tuneful xylophone, played by a dining-car steward walking down the corridor, would call you to the silver-service breakfast, lunch, or dinner. Breakfast was a special delight, with hot tea and coffee poured from silver teapots into cups sporting the railway's logo. Aside from all the usual breakfast offerings, the menu listed Maltabella porridge and Grape Nuts, my favourite cereal.

In the late evening, the bedding steward would come around with the cosy bedrolls with their crisp white sheets and pillow slips. The clinkety clack of the carriage wheels on the track joints was soporific, and I had no trouble sleeping.

I didn't mind the late-night stops at various obscure sidings, waiting and wondering how long we'd be stationary. The jolts of the carriages as we began moving again, and the locomotive's haunting whistle late at night, added to the cosiness and romance of the journey.

The occasional smell of coal burning in the giant black Garratt locomotive wafted on the breeze. You needed to stick your head out the window and get a piece of soot in your eye to get the genuine steam train travel experience.

On a long rail journey, you could also meet interesting people. We were returning residents, but the train carried lots of new immigrants to a booming Rhodesia. The compartment on one side of us contained a family with two daughters, both a little older than me, who spent the entire trip eating figs. I hadn't eaten figs before and was reluctant to try them, so we had little in common. A friendly gentleman and his wife occupied the other neighbouring compartment.

An air of excitement permeated the train as we neared Mafeking, famous for Baden-Powell and the siege. I was disappointed with the small nondescript station, finding it hard to imagine history being made there. The proximity of the Bechuanaland (Botswana) border accounted for some of the buzz.

From the train, Bechuanaland appeared little more than desert scrub. A stop for water for the Garratt locomotive at Palapye provided the most interest. It was the middle of nowhere, with the desert scrub stretching to the horizon. Then suddenly, out of nowhere, as if emerging from the desert sands like ancient warriors in *The Mummy* movies, dozens of locals swarmed towards the train. I remembered this from our earlier trip, so it was a regular stop.

The Africans sold all kinds of curios, including wooden masks, spears, carved wooden animals, and beadwork covers for milk jugs and tea trays. A few offered to sell bush babies. Of course, I wanted one, and my mother bought it for me.

The next morning, we would arrive in Bulawayo, and I heard customs wouldn't allow bush babies into the country. The friendly gentleman in the neighbouring compartment suggested I carry my coat and hide the bush baby in a sleeve. 'Customs will never think of looking there.'

Immigration officers dressed in smart white uniforms carried out their formalities on the train. At Bulawayo station, before we disembarked, I hid the bush baby as instructed. The ruse worked, and we passed through customs on Platform One with no trouble. I thanked the friendly gentleman and said goodbye.

We would stay with my aunt and uncle, who waited at the station to meet us. They drove us to their house in Willsgrove, between the Hotel Rio and Waterford. That's when I discovered bush babies liked to hunt insects at night. Christmas was two weeks away, and insects were abundant. Thick bush grew close to the rear of the house, so we decided it was kindest to release the bush baby.

Imagine my surprise the next morning when my mother showed me the front page of the *Bulawayo Chronicle*. A photo of the friendly gentleman from the train sat next to the headline, 'New Head of Rhodesian Customs Arrives in Bulawayo.'