

THIS IS a story about going back in time, to an era when beautiful, powerful things were made and treasured, and built-in obsolescence unheard-of. It's also about creatures whose paths have crossed and criss-crossed the great oceans for centuries, locked into natural rhythms and dances as old as time.

The story begins in Capital Station in Pretoria. I'm ushered into a waiting room of colonial elegance – inlaid quarry tiles punctuated with faded oriental rugs and carpets; wicker chairs with plump cushions, leather couches, carved wooden tables, and of course, smoked salmon sandwiches. I'm about to board the legendary Rovos Rail train for Cape Town, via Kimberley and Matjiesfontein.

It's the most luxurious train in the world. A large steam engine puffs importantly by the platform which boasts a red post box and koi pond, although after its impressive display of steam and smoke, it goes back to its shed and an electric locomotive supersedes it. My fellow passengers are from the US (second time around), 14 smartly turned-out Chinese yuppies from Shanghai, a couple of Australian farmers, a UK family celebrating Grandpa's 70th, and a "very important" lawyer from Beijing, his wife, young daughter, private guide and interpreter.

That night we dine off porcelain, crystal and silver in a 1933 beautifully restored opulent dining car panelled in polished mahogany. Problem is, we are stuck in the middle of Soweto railway station. It's taken us three hours to get here because of a missing driver and communication problems.

It's surreal. Forty-two people are dining on the finest food, while on the other side of the closed carved wooden shutters, hundreds of weary commuters are waiting for their Friday night trains.

"Only in South Africa..." murmurs my friend, Coral.

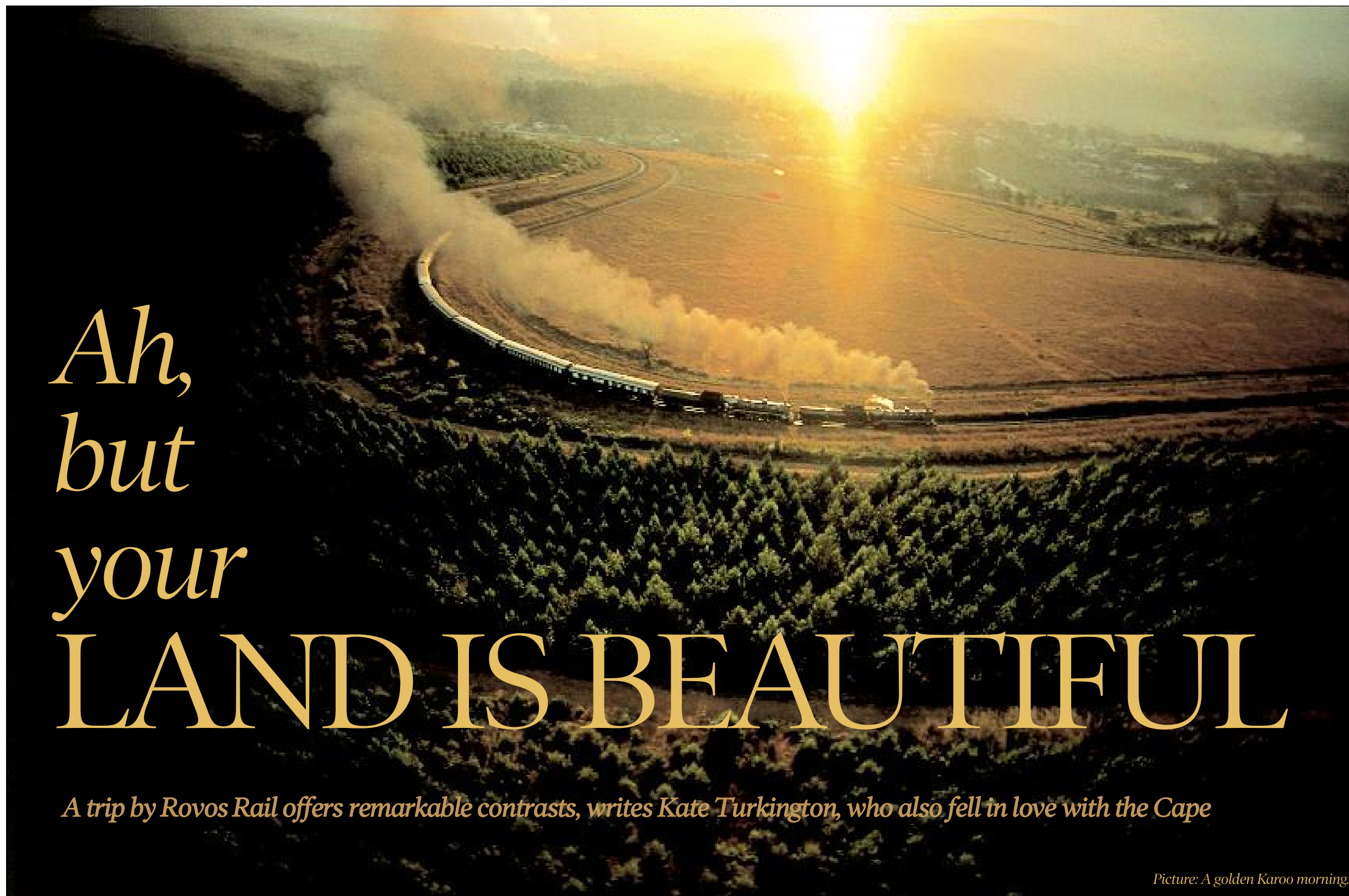
At Kimberley we are taken on an old tram to the newly revamped De Beers Mine Museum – a must if you are ever in the area. We marvel over the Big Hole – the biggest in the world – over five football fields across with blue water glinting 170m below us. Beneath the surface is another 678m, and it's hard to believe this huge hole was made entirely by hand with pick and shovel.

This hole has produced three tons of diamonds – 14-and-a-half million carats – more than anywhere else in the world. After ogling the heavily-protected, dazzling display of De Beers' top diamonds, now on show for the first time, some of the Chinese ladies rush off to buy some of their own at the adjacent jewellers. I buy a T-shirt for a granddaughter who was born 12 years ago in Kimberley on this very date.

The next morning we are in the Karoo, lurching and swaying through a landscape of yellow grass dotted with scrub and dark grey bushes. An occasional white, tin-roofed farm house with creaking windpump punctuates the flat horizon which stretches seemingly forever to a hazy, washed-out blue sky.

The train shudders to a stop 5km from Matjiesfontein and then rattles off. Some of us have decided to walk through the early golden Karoo morning to this perfectly restored Victorian village where Olive Schreiner wrote and lived.

One Chinese girl has underestimated what lies ahead. She is wearing red stilettos. We've already looked round the famous Lord Milner Hotel, visited the old post office and courthouse, and finished a hearty breakfast back on the train,



Ah, but your LAND IS BEAUTIFUL

A trip by Rovos Rail offers remarkable contrasts, writes Kate Turkington, who also fell in love with the Cape

Picture: A golden Karoo morning.

by the time she limps back on.

We sleep in Cape Town at the century-old St James guest house, just across the road from the tidal pools and beaches of Kalk Bay. There are no whales today, but we are en route to De Hoop Nature Reserve, where 40 percent of the world's Southern Right whales calve.

As you drive through the main gate you're wheel-high in fynbos – pinks, yellows, purples, corals, so many shades of green an Irishman would be envious, and proteas of all sizes and colours. In the distance are high white dunes lining 70km of beaches and overlooking the Marine Protected Area, which extends 5km out to sea. At low tide, the rock pools are a thing of wonder, and if you take a guided walk, apart from octopi and starfish, you'll be introduced to sea and shore critters that you may not have known existed.

There's accommodations at prices for all pockets, from tents to rondavels, fully furnished cottages to the 18th-century Manor House, furnished in period style, with yellowwood floors, walls thick enough to hold off any enemies, and bathrooms you can waltz around. My favourite is the 1872 Melkkamer cottage which overlooks an expansive vlei where pelicans sail regally by. The Fig Tree Restaurant offers superb meals at really reasonable prices, from a toasted sandwich to a cordon bleu three-course dinner.

At Koppie Alleen, where you can stay in an isolated four-bedroomed cottage with all mod cons and amazing views, you will see the whales. There they are, over a 100 of them breaching and blowing, tails spinning in the air, flukes flapping the ocean surface, backs arching and bowing, drifting and cruising lazily just beneath the surface. A mother and calf float by, a young whale flips and turns.

An entry in the Koppie Alleen guestbook reads: "Diamond-clustered skies, turquoise oceans, and standing on the archways of paradise, glimpses of infinity..."

That night the giant swathe of the Milky Way curves over the night sky. Huge stars glitter. A contented clucking from the bushes tells us that the Cape spurfowl have settled down for the night. Eland, ghostly in the moonlight, amble by. Bontebok doze. Only the faint whispering roar of the ocean disturbs the quiet.

From De Hoop, we make our way through the Cape Winelands to Robertson, the Breede River valley and Excelsior wine estate. Here, creative vision and a love for what is past and beautiful, have urged owners Freddie and Kathleen de Wet to restore the original manor house.

The old house is an unusual architectural crossover between Cape Dutch and Victorian. The gables are Cape Dutch, the long cool verandah and bay windows Victorian. Antiques and collectibles, many belonging to the original families, complement the yellowwood floors and ornate fireplaces. You'll sleep in a fourposter, sink into a

clawed bath on a black-and-white chequered tiled bathroom floor, and dine on asparagus soup, veal pie and decadent chocolate pudding.

At a wine-tasting at sunset, sipping the affordable Excelsior wines, we watch the sun set over the dam. A couple of African black ducks, some cormorants, grebes, and a pair of pied kingfishers, watch us as we raise our glasses.

Freddie says that we must come back to Robertson for at least three days as there is so much to do – walking, boating, birding, or just soaking up the Cape countryside. I've never been a great fan of the Cape. But now I am irrevocably hooked....



A locomotive at Capital Station, Pretoria.



The elegant dining car.



Melkkamer cottage, built in 1872, overlooks a vlei where pelicans sail regally by.



A Rovos Rail signal box.

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The Breede River Valley outside Robertson.



Passing through the Outeniquas.