Travel

View from the bridge

South Africa | Permanently parked on a bridge in the middle of Kruger National Park, an old train has been reborn as a luxury hotel. By *Hedley Twidle*

A hotel in a train. On a bridge. Over a river (full of crocodiles), in one of the world's most famous wildlife parks. When word began to spread about Kruger Shalati (with its no-nonsense tag line: The Train on the Bridge), there was a mixture of excitement and consternation in safari tourism circles.

Excitement at the sheer chutzpah of the thing: 12 sleeper carriages, remodelled into 24 luxurious rooms. They stand shacked up on the century-old Selati rail bridge just north of Skukuza, headquarters of the Kruger National Park. And consternation that this high-concept boutique hotel might be out of place, even a little kitsch, in a place known more for spartan rest camps and thatched rondavels. Kruger Shalati's mid-bridge centrepiece is a photogenic lounge car and deck where you can sip cocktails in an electric blue plunge pool over the Sabie River.

I arrived with none of these concerns, being of the opinion that the whole safari park experience has always been slightly over the top — and is best enjoyed in this spirit. Peering over the edge of the Insta-pool, I found my eyes drawn to a pint glass that had fallen on a sandbank far below. It was perched next to the muddy smear left by a crocodile.

"Big guy," said Justice Mutshinya, the senior camp manager, who was showing us around. "He was parked there for three days." What happened if guests dropped their wallet? "It's a headache. We have to get park rangers with rifles to escort us into the riverbed."

He handed me the bedroom key card. "DO NOT DROP THIS IN THE RIVER" it implored. The card unlocked a railway carriage that was surprisingly big inside — and nothing like a railway carriage. No polished brass, wood or curtains. It was all pastel fabrics, Afrocentric textiles, honeycomb mosaics and high-tech blinds. A super king-sized bed fitted in easily, along with minibar, double washbasins and a standalone tub from where you could watch your fellow mammals far below in their bath rituals.

The struts of the bridge truss drew bold, Sheffield-engineered diagonals across the windows. Beyond was the wide flood plain of the Sabie, then bushveld stretching to the horizon: thornscrub wonderfully green after a wet summer; elephants mud-bathing in the middle distance; fish eagles on thermals, letting out their forlorn cries (and some guests calling back to them from a birding app). At a ford far downstream, some 4x4s had stopped. I wondered if they might be looking through telephoto lenses at the new additions to the ecosystem: namely me, sipping a Windhoek lager in my silky dressing gown.

Getting the rooms right in such a limited space had been one of the big challenges, said executive manager Judiet Barnes. And that was after hauling the carriages here one by one from scrapyards around Johannesburg — the rails stop just beyond the ends of the bridge, so the carriages came on lorries. I thought of the roads I had driven to reach the gates of the Kruger park: gouged and potholed by coal and timber trucks.

A luxury hotel on a train going nowhere, its carriages lugged here on the back of "abnormal load" lorries. There is an irony hovering over the whole concept for local visitors, given that so much of the country's rail infrastructure and rolling stock is now defunct.

"The bridge talks," said Barnes, who spoke about the five years of planning and permissions, and then the delay caused by Covid-19, when game took over the roads of the Kruger but all human construction halted.

"What does it say?"

"Oh, all kinds of things. I would sit there and listen to it in lockdown, the metal contracting in the winter evenings. It creaks, it sings, the wind channels underneath it. It feels like there's a ghost walking."

The roominess of the sleepers at Kruger Shalati is possible because the passageway (which would normally run the length of a train) has been exteriorised. An outside walkway of slatted wood runs along one side of the bridge, giving access to all the carriages. In the other direction, it leads to the hotel bar and restaurant on the riverbank, where dinner was punctuated by crashes in the nearby trees, then the strobing torchlights of guests who had come prepared. An elephant was pushing over an acacia, just metres from our meze platter.

After dark, there's little to do except walk back along the now illuminated gangway, suspended in the sounds (cicadas, frogs, crickets) and the silence (no engines) of the bushveld night. Because of heritage and environmental concerns, the lighting on the bridge is subtle: a floor-level strip concealed from the Skukuza main camp, where restaurants and lodges look bridge-wards from the river's edge. But this lightsaber gangplank (my favourite feature) was strong enough to attract an array of wondrous insects, in a profusion and vividness I hadn't seen for years.

There were praying mantids with their triangle heads and bulbous eyes, toktokkie beetles doing their press-ups, katydids with wing cases like bright green leaves. There was also a big, dragonfly-looking thing with banded wings — a creature I had never seen before.

Clockwise from above: Kruger Shalati, which opened in December on a bridge above the Sabie River; elephants in the park; one of the spacious bedrooms; the external gangway; the plunge pool hangs over the river in the middle of the bridge

"Sightings aren't always as common as in the private game reserves," Njajula explained. "People don't always realise that. It's because the Kruger is such a big park. It's a more subtle thing, but also so unexpected, what might happen here on any given day."

He pointed out the ghost of the old railway line running through the bush. The tracks were lifted in the 1970s, but you can still glimpse grassed embankments, overgrown sidings, an occasional culvert full of warthogs.

The Selati railway was begun in the 1890s, following the discovery of alluvial gold to the north, and only completed in 1912, after much corruption and scandal, and the loss of many lives. In 1923, South African Railways began to offer a "round in nine" trip from Pretoria to Mozambique and back. The highlight of this nine-day safari was a stop on the same bridge where the hotel is now. Visitors would disembark to be

entertained round bonfires and braais laid on by the first park warden, a Scottish cavalry officer named James Stevenson-Hamilton (known locally as Skukuza). A grand piano was carried out and played under the stars while armed rangers stood guard.

So in one sense, Kruger Shalati is reanimating the park's heritage and its origin story. For early wilderness campaigners such as Stevenson-Hamilton, the train safaris served as proof that the area could sustain itself as a tourist destination. Thanks to his efforts, the original Sabi nature reserve was enlarged and proclaimed Kruger National Park in 1926. That, at least, is one side of the story. But, as in many parts of the world, railways carry an ambivalent, often traumatic history here. Just listen to the great Hugh Masekela rapping a cowbell and shrieking like a train whistle in his epic song "Stimela (The Coal Train)" to get a sense of how trains meant migrant labour, mining and dispossession for so many South Africans. Today, some 2m people live within a 50km radius of Kruger, many of them descendants of families who were forcibly removed to create the wilderness preserve, or pushed into ethnic "homelands" by apartheid social engineering.

The second part of the hotel's name, Shalati, is taken from a female leader of the Tsonga people, many of whom were displaced to make way for the park by Stevenson-Hamilton. As Jacob Dlamini points out in *Safari Nation,* a recent social history of the park, it is this history that earned him the moniker Skukuza, "he who sweeps clean" or "the destroyer", among local communities who had their lives and livelihoods turned upside down. The result of these histories is a longstanding and complicated suspicion of nature conservation in much African political thought. "I do not want to spend my holidays watching crocodiles," quipped Tanzanian President Julius Nyerere in 1961.

But as Dlamini goes on to show, national parks have thrived and expanded in postcolonial Africa. In tracing the buried histories of tourism by black South Africans, who visited the Kruger all through the 20th century (even when they were not made to feel welcome), he explores how the game park might be reimagined as an inclusive space that is aware of its human history — not fenced off from it.

Today, the Skukuza main camp is the nerve centre of what is virtually a state within a state: an area the size of Israel with its own enforcement agencies and highly militarised borders. Concealed in the low scrub are caches of automatic weapons for anti-poaching operations, a rhino orphanage, walk-in safes full of elephant ivory — not to mention a steakhouse franchise and a nail bar. All the more reason to understand the game park as an all-too-human creation, rather than pining for some remote and unspoilt wilderness.

On our final afternoon, we decided against the game drive and stayed on the pool deck instead, looking down at the riverbed through binoculars. Njajula helped me to read the archive of animal tracks in the sand below. The double kidney bean of a buffalo hoof. Splodgy, nondescript blobs from elephants and hippos, but such delicate spoor from zebras, almost like an omega. The standard cat's paw was hyena, and those very human hands were chacma baboons and vervet monkeys. The vervets had been chasing each other along the train roof the night before, a bit like *The Jungle Book* crossed with a Bond film (which is a pretty good summation of the Kruger Shalati experience). The lounge bar guests moved from one side of the bridge to the other, transfixed by the progress of a crocodile floating lazily downstream. The pint glass was gone.

Concealed in the low scrub are caches of automatic weapons — not to mention a steakhouse and a nail bar

Hedley Twidle is a writer and academic based at the University of Cape Town

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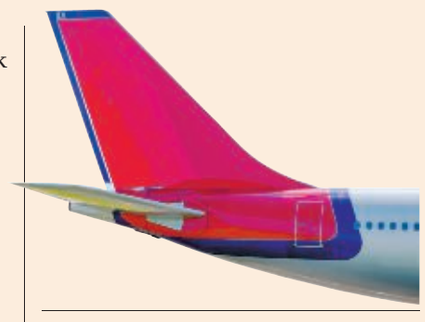
Hedley Twidle was a guest of Mavros Safaris (*mavrossafaris.com*), which offers a three-night trip to Kruger Shalati from £1,750 per person, including all meals, drinks, game drives and transfers as well as return flights from London to Skukuza Airport; a week's package with three nights at Kruger Shalati would cost from £3,800. Tourists are currently allowed to enter South Africa with proof of a negative PCR test taken in the 72 hours before travel, but some countries are imposing restrictions on travellers returning from the country; see *sa-covid-19-travel.info*



James Crabtree

Business travel

Might the future of pandemic-era travel look more like a prison visitors' room than a business-class lounge? It's an unhappy thought, but one I grappled with recently as I met an old friend passing through Singapore, inside a new facility designed to allow Covid-safe meetings behind airtight glass panels.

In normal times Singapore revels in its status as a travel hub, with Changi airport widely judged among the world's best. But the skies above the city-state are all but empty, with only a dribble of visitors each day. Almost all arriving travellers have to quarantine for two-weeks inside a local hotel. The result is a country that is largely Covid-free but a hub in name only; I last left town well over a year ago.

So it was with great excitement that I hopped into a cab one recent morning to visit Connect@Changi, described as "the world's first quarantine-free travel bubble for business travellers", where transiting visitors are allowed meetings with locals, albeit separated by glass walls. Dreamt-up by Singapore's government, the new facility is predicated on the idea that some meetings have to happen face-to-face, even in a pandemic. Those with deals to sign or urgent issues to discuss, the thinking goes, can fly into Singapore and stay in the purpose-built hotel, with 150 bedrooms and rates starting at S$384 (£207) per night. There are 40 meeting rooms, for between four and 22 attendees.

Having been herded through arrivals by staff in full protective gear, visitors are then placed in a testing centre next to the baggage carousel. Test done, a Covid-secure taxi arrives for the five-minute journey to the hotel. After being confined to their room overnight until an email confirming a negative result comes through, they are then free to roam the hotel, which includes a central courtyard and gym. Meetings done, they fly right back out again, avoiding both quarantine and any contact with the local population.

The hotel building itself isn't terribly easy to find, located in a remote corner of the sprawling airport convention centre. Inside I was directed down a sparsely decorated corridor and into a room the size of a large cupboard, where my friend, Ryan Heath, a journalist with Politico, sat behind a floor-to-ceiling glass partition. Covid-19 has introduced any number of odd new greetings, from fist bumps and elbow touches to awkward apologetic waves. To these we added one more, as both placed a spread-out hand on the glass between us to say hello.

We chatted for an hour inside our cell, our voices picked up on internal microphones and broadcast to the other side of the glass. Air-conditioning systems hummed in the background, recycling any pathogens away via separate "air handling" systems. Some rooms have document transfer boxes, small airlocks equipped with ultraviolet disinfection systems, through which papers can be passed. A monitor sat behind me, in case I wanted to give an impromptu in-person PowerPoint presentation. Food arrived too: a plastic-wrapped curry and a small boxed juice for me, and a small breakfast plate with fruit for him.

> We added one more to the list of awkward Covid greetings, placing a spread-out hand on the glass between us to say hello

On one hand, this new facility shows that the authorities here do not expect business-as-usual to resume any time soon. On the other, the fact that such places have not popped up around the world suggests demand for in-person meetings is lower than might have been assumed. Most of us now find that Zoom will do just about as well.

Certainly, Connect@Changi seemed quiet during our visit, although the facility claims it has hosted hundreds of meetings since opening in February. Not to be put off, Singapore now plans a major expansion: by the end of 2021 there will be space for some 1,300 visitors in a total of 340 meeting rooms. A rare treat though it was to greet a friend passing through town, most travellers will be fervently hoping they won't be needed.

James Crabtree is a Singapore-based author