Herman van Niewehuizen had lost his cool. That much was clear when he stomped off the train he managed for South Africa’s Rovos Rail and climbed into our Jeep. He punched a number on his cell phone and motioned the driver to turn down the radio and get on the road to Pietersburg’s airport. As he waited for his call to go through, van Niewehuizen turned to photographer Baron Wolman and me and hissed: “The Americans! They didn’t listen! Rohan was very clear. Everybody else pre-packed. One hundred fifty-five kilograms of luggage!”

On the other end of the line, Rohan Vos picked up. Vos, the owner of Rovos Rail, had warned his passengers about their luggage. Two days earlier, he’d gathered them in Rovos’ Pretoria rail station to explain the itinerary and the rules of the luxury rail-and-air tour on which they were about to embark. Of the passengers, little was expected. Beyond the jacket and tie he asked gentlemen to wear for evening meals, his only request was that when the train had covered the 200 miles to Pietersburg, where passengers would transfer to a 1950s-era airliner for the final leg to Victoria Falls, they were to have whittled their carry-on luggage down to just 15 kilograms (33 pounds) each. The remainder of their belongings would follow on another airplane.

The Americans—a trio of lawyers from New York City and a small child—had played dumb and refused to split up their luggage. Now they would need to shed a total of 95 kilograms of carry-on, and that would delay their bus ride to the airport and possibly the flight itself. Van Niewehuizen was pre-coronary. He cursed into the phone, mixing Afrikaans with accented English. Though we couldn’t hear it, the message from Vos’ end of the line seemed clear: Herman, calm down.

The aircraft were fogged in at their base in Lanseria, 150 miles south. The New Yorkers would have time to repack. It was January, just past the peak of Africa’s summer tourist season. At Rovos’ invitation, Wolman and I had traveled to South Africa to experience service aboard the company’s Consolidated Vultee 440s. They are among the last of the 1950s-era, twin-radial-engine airliners flying. Rovos uses its two 440s mostly on trips to Victoria Falls, the thundering, mile-wide cascade on the Zambezi River along the Zambia-Zimbabwe border, but they also team up with the company’s Douglas DC-3 on air safaris around southern Africa.

When addressing the passengers from behind a conductor’s stand inside the rail station, Vos looked every bit like a lanky, distinguished Willy Wonka. His enormous hands flared with each sentence as he welcomed travelers into the world he created for his own amusement: more than 60 train carriages, five antique steam locomotives, three classic airliners, and a 56-acre rail station site, which also hosts a transportation museum and a soccer pitch. The company dates back to 1986, when he purchased and refurbished a few train carriages he hoped to convert to a rolling vacation home. Rail fees ended up being too daunting for the trips he wanted to make with his family, so the railways suggested he cover costs by selling tickets to tourists.
Fifty years ago, Metroliners plied short-haul routes around the world (right, a Convair 440). The nostalgia rush one gets from the Convairs (above) comes at a cost. Convair accepts: The airliners have limited capacity.

Rohon Vos (right, seated) wanted a classic propeller-driven, reciprocating-powered aircraft to complement his rolling stock. Then he added: splendor: leather, linen, and fine cuisine.

Vos rebuilt not just the rail cars but the original station, where he greets guests (below). Rovos technicians gain easy access to the pampered Pratt & Whitney R-2800s within the Convair's foldout "orange peel" cowling (right).

The idea stuck. In 1988, Rovos launched its first journey, a round trip between Pretoria and Kruger National Park. The same year, Vos sold off the auto parts business that had made him wealthy to devote himself fully to his rail enterprise. In 2001, he added the airplanes. Like all Rovos routes, the Pretoria-Victoria Falls trip appeals to those who want the romance of luxury rail travel through a distant and exotic land. The slow journey through Gauteng province offers gourmet meals and unhurried wine, bag beds, and claw-foot bathtubs. A couple of hours aboard a luxurious airliner, on the other hand, seems less meaningful to most passengers. In fact, the majority hadn’t given the flight to Victoria Falls a moment’s thought; all they cared about was that the flight gave them the opportunity to photograph one of the world’s seven natural wonders.

The 440 was Convair’s response to the superior but piston-four-engine, turboprop-powered Vickers Viscount. It was the company’s second iteration of the 240 Convair-Liner airframe, a design that debuted in 1945 as the world’s first pressurized, twin-engine transport. In 1951, the 340 was introduced with a fuselage and wings and increased fuel and seating capacities, but it wasn’t until 1954 that the Convair’s signature system is...
Vapor trails corkscrew off the 440's.

Alternatives are more adventurous. (some even set you down for picnics of the falls and the surrounding region.)

Mike Rovos' newly condensed luggage, he says. "But it doesn't change the situation. It's a pet peeve of mine, but it played to rave reviews.

When the other passengers arrived at Livingstone airport, it was evident that the story of van Niehuizen's confrontation with the New Yorkers had made the rounds. I'd seen him only briefly since he'd stormed off the Jeep. Now he reappeared to shepherd his passengers through security and immigration. His mood had improved. When asked about the New Yorkers' newly condensed luggage, he responded with a smile and a story about a Roxos Air captain who had ordered the contents of a Convair's bag gage held off and set the ramp so that the entire group of passengers could repack.

Even small adjustments to the Convair'spayloads make a difference to the job they were purchased for," says Vos. "And sometimes we definitely need a stronger, more powerful airplane," he says. But he can sympathize with Vos as well. "[Rohan] has put a hell of a lot of money into these things. And if you're going to relax and restore the lost part of conversation."

The refueling stop in Botswana was made more interesting by heavy rain that had cooled the air but washed out local electricity. Passengers milled about the darkened Francistown International Airport terminal drinking from juice boxes and trading stories about game preserves. Others stood outside and smoked.

After an hour, the flight attendants announced that the airplane was fueled, and the 41 of us tramped across the ramp and up the Convair's extendable airstairs to our seats. The rain had abated to a drizzle. The second leg began with another long takeoff roll and shallow ascent over the flooded bush surrounding the airport.

Service aboard the aircraft was meticulous and slightly over the top. (The same was true of the trail.) Upon returning to a state from dinner, one finds a bottle of champagne sitting on a turned-down bed.) The flight attendants began by passing out embroi dered tailored sheets and long-stem yellow roses, followed with an offering of wine or mango-orange juice. Next came a light lunch of cheese and cucumber on a hash glass, beef and onion skewers, a phyllo dough pastry, a spring roll, and a spacy frisser. Delicious.

The day's early start—4:30 a.m.—and the dull noise of the slow-spinning (just 1,000 rpm) propellers encouraged napping, but lunch renewed the passengers' interest in the landscape. At low altitude and low speed, Africa can be absorbed on a per-vehicle basis. South Africa's countryside—its low Drakensberg Mountains, paved roads, and occasional farms—looks like rural Virginia or Kentucky. But Botswana, Zimbabwe, and Zambia scoured steadily underneath us like the Africa of National Geographic articles: squat trees, muddy rivers, and patches of red soil. A commotion in the cabin marked the arrival of the money shot: Mist from Victoria Falls creeping upward in wisps above the Batoka Gorge. Moments later, the bump of the tires touching down marked the end of our flight. In the time it took to taxi and deplane, enthusiasm for the day's adventure had vanished. Everybody wanted to be there already, to relax poolside at a posh hotel before venturing to the falls or nearby game parks. In the Livingstone airport parking lot, hotel shuttles idled as we awaited the luggage airplane, which was 30 minutes behind us. The left over fuel, the refueling stop, the lengthy wait for our bags—these would have had U.S. travelers screaming. But here such complications are shrugged off as just Africa.

We were nearly two hours behind schedule, and Rose Orenstein's husband George had taken notice. "It's been about six hours since we got off the train," he calculated. "Despite all of the elegance, and all the comforts, and the pure joy of this flight, the reality is if you have to get someplace, this is a thing of the past." Christof Heilweg of Switzerland appraised the day more succinctly: "It was nice. Not a second time. Once was enough.

Vos recognizes that the Convairs are not ideal, but he has no plans to sell them. Operations chief Vere-Russell would like to see a change to a jet, perhaps a Fokker 28. "From a business point of view, an economical point of view, we definitely need a stronger, more powerful airplane," he says. But he can sympathize with Vos as well. "[Rohan] has put a hell of a lot of money into these things. And if you're going to relax and restore the lost part of conversation."

Evan with the delays, I wasn’t sure that such a change was necessary. By definition, a journey with flyovers is not point-to-point transportation. A ticket buys you the time to soak up the finer details of a Vista or a passing town, of a steam locomotive or a half-century-old airliner, of fine food and the companionship of fellow travelers. Rovos marketing agent David Patrick had once told me Vos' "whole ethos behind this thing was that he wanted to give people a chance to relax and to restore the lost art of conversation." When the luggage (and Wolman) landed and passengers hugged and carpet-company for the last time to claim their bags, I couldn't help but think he succeeded.