

ROVOS AIR



The Convair-Liner was once a common sight at airports around the world, but today even the turboprop conversions (580 and 640) have all but vanished. South Africa's Lanseria Airport (IATA: HLA/ICAO: FALA) outside Johannesburg, however, is home to a pair of operational piston-engine versions. They are not clapped-out freighters eking out a living with a fly-by-night operator. On the contrary, the two airplanes are immaculately fitted out, flying tourists on luxury services to the region's many tourist destinations.

Convair 440 ZS-ARV in its element.

Both Convair 440s belong to Rovos Air, a charter airline created in 2001 by South African entrepreneur Rohan Vos. He is also the owner of Rovos Rail, a company that operates 'upmarket' steam train safaris throughout Southern Africa. Rovos Rail attempts to recapture the romance of a bygone era, when travellers experienced the magic and mystery of Africa in a relaxed and elegant fashion. Indeed, Rovos claims to operate the most luxurious trains in the world, and with good reason—suites aboard the trains begin at 'Deluxe' class and work their way up to 'Royal'.

Rovos Rail had often relied on chartered aircraft for combined air/rail trips. With increasing unrest in Zimbabwe threatening its flagship route to Victoria Falls, the company decided to fly its train passengers across that troubled country to Livingstone to view the falls from the Zambian side. With the rôle of aircraft in tour operations increasing dramatically, Vos decided to establish his own airline to bring the work in-house. This would also give him more control over the quality of service provided.

To equip his airline, Vos wanted a pressurized aircraft with a classic feel. His first choice was the Lockheed Electra, recognizing that the type's size was ideal for expected loads. However, the South African Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) was concerned about support for the Electra, and dissuaded him from the plan. The search then turned to the Allison-powered Convair 580, but none were available. A Douglas DC-6 was considered next. NCA (Namibia Commercial Aviation) was approached about selling one of its well-appointed examples, but the company was not interested (*Airways*, March 1998).

Finally, a Rovos employee came across two Convair 440s advertised for sale on an Internet website. These two aircraft, originally built in 1954 as a VC-131D and C-131D (Model 340-67 and 340-79, respectively) for the US Air Force (USAF), had been acquired by Bolivia's Líneas Aéreas Canedo (LAC) in 1992 from the Davis-Monthan storage yard in the Arizona desert, and had been flying them from Cochabamba to domestic destinations (*Airways*, August 2000). But the improvement of Bolivia's road system had eroded the Convairs' market, so LAC retired the pair. The price was right, and an agreement reached between Rovos and the South American company.

The aircraft were picked up in Bolivia by a team of Rovos Air pilots led by Johan Olivier, the company's chief pilot. A priority was to obtain type ratings using Bolivian instructors. Eventually, ferry tanks were fitted for the 11-hour Atlantic crossing, which was made between Natal, Brazil, and Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire [Ivory Coast]. From there, the Convairs continued south along the west coast of Africa to Ondangwa, Namibia, before finally arriving in the Republic of South Africa.

Both Convair-Liners were extensively refurbished at Pietersburg, in the Northern Province of South Africa, before entering service. The airframes were in very good condition—despite being almost 50 years old—having accumulated relatively few flying hours. They were carefully checked for corrosion, but nothing was found. The avionics were completely replaced, with new radios and radar installed along with such

The interior of Rovos Air's Convair-Liners is patterned on that of the parent company's luxurious trains, with leather seats, carpeting, and polished wood paneling.



STEFANO PAGOIA

The Convairs are powered by two 3,000hp Pratt & Whitney R-2800-GB16 18-cylinder radials driving three-blade Hamilton Standard propellers.

necessities such as TCAS (Traffic Alert and Collision Avoidance System) and GPWS (Ground Proximity Warning System) as well as such niceties as moving map displays and GPS (Global Positioning System). Refurbishment work also included fitting a luxurious cabin, with green leather seats, polished wood paneling, and carpeting. The Convairs were also fitted with full hot galleys. As a final touch, the USAF trim that they had sported during their time in Bolivia was replaced with a new color scheme patterned on that of the parent company's trains.

Rovos Air flew its first service on September 6, 2002, using Convair ZS-ARV. The flight took a party of tourists to Kisani,



ROVOS AIR



ATHOL FRANZ/AFRICAN PILOT



Rovos Air's DC-3 was built in 1944 at Oklahoma City. The C-47A served with a Royal Canadian Air Force squadron during World War II, and participated in Operation Market Garden, the Battle of Arnhem, in September 1944, and the crossing of the Rhine in 1945. After spending several years in Canada, the USA, and Cuba, it arrived in South Africa in 1974 and flew with a succession of airlines, including United Air Services, Avia Air Charter, and Debonair.

The aircraft's name, Delaney, is that of a baby born on-board in October 1975, while operating a scheduled flight between Sishen and Johannesburg for United Air Services.

Refurbished at Wonderboom Airport, outside Pretoria, the DC-3 has the same luxurious leather seats as the Convairs.



PHOTOS: STEFANO PAGIOLA

Botswana, near the Chobe National Park. The second Convair (ZS-BRV) joined its sibling in service later that month.

To cater for smaller loads, a Douglas DC-3 was acquired in June 2002 in a deal that is itself reminiscent of olden times. Vos learned over coffee that Gavin Branson, owner of AirQuarius, was seeking to dispose of a DC-3 acquired when AirQuarius took

over Lanseria-based Debon Air Tours. They reached an agreement then and there, and the deal was sealed with a handshake.

Rovos Air flies two main types of services. Its bread-and-butter work consists of connecting with Rovos Rail's train services. In particular, the Convairs are used to fly passengers on



The rail and air routes of Rovos Rail Tours.

the weekly Pretoria–Victoria Falls rail service on the segment from Pietersburg to Livingstone. Other flights pick up passengers who opt for one-way train trips and return them to their point of origin. The maximum capacity of the trains is either 44 or 72, depending on whether one or two dining cars are attached (the company insists on being able to seat all passengers for dinner at once, if they so wish). This matches well with the 44-seat capacity of the Convairs.

The second major rôle for the Convair-Liners is to fly two periodic 13-day ‘air safaris’. A ‘Central Africa Air Safari’ takes passengers through Botswana, Zambia, and Tanzania, while the ‘Southern Africa Air Safari’ calls in at South Africa itself, Namibia, Botswana, and Zambia. Each safari includes stops at such destinations as the Okavango Delta, Zanzibar, the Ngorongoro Crater, and Victoria Falls. The capacity of the lodges rather than that of the aircraft usually sets the maximum number of passengers. These safaris are typically operated once every three months. They are never scheduled at the same time, so that one aircraft is always in reserve should the one flying the safari develop a problem. Europeans—particularly Britons and Germans—and US residents are the main customers for the air safaris.

Air safari itineraries are carefully arranged as much as six months in advance, to ensure that the necessary supplies are available where needed. The availability of avgas is an important consideration, and that of engine oil even greater. Rovos stockpiles supplies

water-methanol mixture and oil at strategic locations along each route. In addition, each aircraft carries a set of essential spares, including spare nose and main wheel tires, a fuel pump, and a water-methanol pump. A mechanic—who doubles as a flight engineer—accompanies each trip.

Rovos Air also flies a variety of independent charters when aircraft are available, although the company’s own services always take precedence. New products, such as golfing tours, are also being developed.

The two Convair-Liners typically fly about 20 hours a month each, while the DC-3 usually operates around 15—and more during peak periods, which generally run from August to November and from January to May. As the DC-3 is not pressurized, its use is generally limited to shorter trips. In between flights, Rovos’s Convairs can usually be found at Lanseria undergoing attention from the airline’s maintenance crews. The type’s radial engines, in particular, are very maintenance-intensive. Heavy maintenance is usually scheduled during the slow winter months. Because the Rovos hangar at HLA is not large enough to accommodate the Convair-Liners for heavy maintenance, space is usually rented from other operators.

Rovos has a core of four permanent pilots, which it supplements with part-time pilots during the busy season. The South African Air Force operated DC-4s until relatively recently, and the South African Historic Flight (*Airways*, February 2004) continues to do so to this day, creating a large pool of potential part-time pilots with large round engine experience. For example, Lyle Dodds, Rovos Air’s CEO and one of its pilots, once flew for the Historic Flight, and for the SAAF before that. Two flight attendants (‘hostesses’) serve the passengers on each Convair-Liner, although regulations require only one.

(*Airways thanks Lyle Dodds and Jennifer Dickinson for their kind assistance with preparation of this article.*)

Fast Facts—ROVOS AIR

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Founded: 2001

Start date: September 6, 2002

Ownership: Rovos Rail Tours (Rohan Vos)

CEO: Lyle Dodds

Fleet

Type	Registration	Seats	Engines	Remarks
Douglas DC-3	ZS-CRV	Y21	PW R-1830	1944-built C-47A-DK
Convair 440	ZS-ARV	Y44	PW R-2800-CB16	cvt'd 340-67 (VC-131D)
Convair 440	ZS-BRV	Y44	PW R-2800-CB16	cvt'd 340-79 (C-131D)