

# Rail Revival

TRAIN TRAVEL IS HEADING TOWARDS A BRIGHT NEW FUTURE, AND THE MIDDLE EAST'S RAIL SECTOR IS ON THE MOVE

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**W**hen the Dubai Metro first launched – on 9 September 2009 – it was big news. So big, in fact, that this was no ordinary transport system: it was an attraction in itself. Some residents across the city were quoted in the news as having ridden it with no specific destination in mind – several even taking it from end to end – simply for the novelty of being able to ride the first rapid transit train network in the GCC.

Within its first two days of operation, it had already welcomed 11,000 passengers. It had been a longtime dream – reportedly created following a vision His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, the ruler of Dubai, had during a visit to London with his father back in 1959. That vision, which came from a moment of marvelling at the driverless trains there, sparked his ambition to one day bring a world-class, sustainable transport system to his own beautiful city.

By September 2024 – when it celebrated its 15-year anniversary – it had welcomed more than 2.4 billion passengers. The world's longest driverless metro line (the Red Line was officially recognised as such by the Guinness World Records on 23 May 2011), it has grown from an initial 10 stations to 53. And on 19 December 2024, an announcement was made by Dubai's Roads and

Transport Authority (RTA) stating that the Dubai Metro Blue Line Project is expected to commence operations on 9 September 2029. The project will mark a major new phase for the system that coincides with the Dubai Metro's 20th anniversary. With 14 new stations spanning 30km – and 28 new trains within its network – by 2030, the new line is expected to carry up to 200,000 riders, rising to an estimated 320,000 by 2040.

It's all part of the Dubai 2040 Master Plan – a framework that aims to transform the city into one wherein every resident can find whatever they need within 20 minutes, underlined by convenient transport that can get them wherever they need to go quickly and easily. Another key part of the plan is to double the amount of green and recreational spaces in the city, boosting the number of nature-filled areas to 60 per cent, alongside green corridors, more pedestrian- and cyclist-friendly mobility, larger public beaches, and more.

The use of mass transit and flexible means of transportation, not to mention more of those that support sustainability goals, is an essential part of it – and given what an enormous impact Dubai Metro's current Red and Green Lines have already had on the city, the new Blue Line will undeniably play a big role here.

Since its launch, the ease of transport that the rail network has provided has enabled much more

choice for Dubai's residents and visitors. It didn't just cause a shift in how people got around – it also created a major cultural evolution in the way they explored, experienced, and lived in the city.

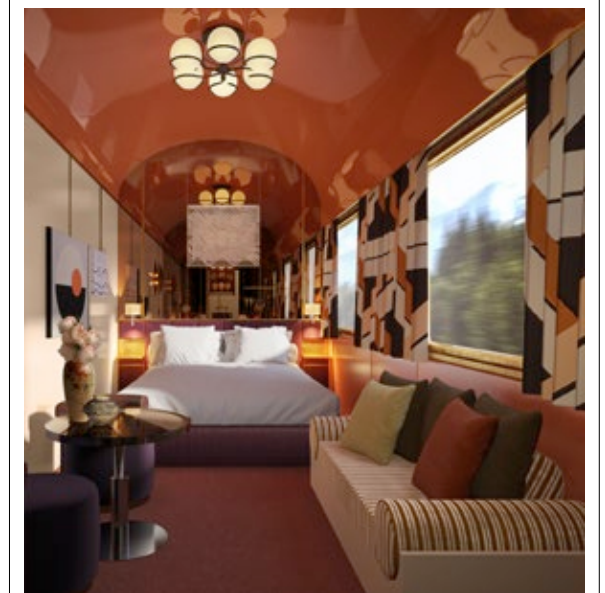
Railway has long been known as one of the safest forms of transport. It's typically efficient – and energy-efficient – and on a train, you'll never risk getting stuck in a traffic jam. Unlike a bus or a car, on a train, you can get up to stretch your legs, with more freedom to move around – especially if you're on one that has the added benefit of dining cars, sleeping cabins, and lounges, complete with decent power outlets and wifi. There's typically also a beautiful view. From Switzerland's Glacier Express to Norway's Bergen Railway, scenic train journeys aren't just a way to get from A to B – they're destinations in themselves. Trains have made up the setting of countless movies and books throughout history – and whether you're more drawn to *The Darjeeling Limited*, *The Polar Express*, or *Bullet Train* (most likely not the train on *Snowpiercer*, though), this mode of transport has long held a romantic and historical appeal.

When it comes to trains that have been made legend through literature and film, none are more iconic →

**ABOVE:** Dubai Metro is the first rapid transit train network in the GCC

**BELOW:** Rendering of the Orient Express La Dolce Vita

**OPPOSITE PAGE:** Rendering of the Orient Express La Dolce Vita







ABOVE: The La Dolce Vita Orient Express will launch in 2025

March and November each year, guests can still enjoy its beautiful sleeper and restaurant carriages while passing through destinations including Geneva, Prague, Vienna, Budapest, Istanbul, Bucharest, and Sinaia, with sightseeing opportunities along the way. From time to time,

these destinations will change by season, and over the years, it has occasionally incorporated additional stops in places like Switzerland, Germany, Slovakia, Poland, Scandinavia, the Netherlands, Belgium, and Italy.

During the past few years, a couple more options have come up: An ÖBB NightJet has been running the Paris-Vienna route three times a week since December 2021, and in 2025, Accor will be launching its very own Orient Express from Paris to Istanbul. To use the name, the French hospitality company purchased a 50 per cent stake in the Orient Express brand from SNCF, and since 2018, it has been renovating 17 CIWL carriages from the now-defunct Nostalgie Istanbul Orient Express for this new iteration. With the cars originally dating back to the 1920s and 1930s, it's a beautiful way

of paying homage to the original train while elevating it to appeal to a modern audience.

Accor's new Orient Express will operate two services: one across Central Europe (covering France, Germany, Austria, Hungary, and Czechia), and one that travels the original mythic route (covering France, Germany, Austria, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, and Türkiye). Its inaugural journey is scheduled to take place on 4 April 2025.

Among Accor's new vision for this paragon of "slow travel" is a return to Italy through their La Dolce Vita Orient Express. After a presale that took place in 2022 (wherein 400 of its cabins were quickly snapped up for its maiden voyage) – for an initially-planned launch in 2023, then moved to 2024 – this highly-anticipated train journey officially opened for reservations in August 2024, before it will finally travel in spring 2025.

Developed by Arsenale Group – an Italian company that develops and manages luxury hospitality and lifestyle assets – and conceived by architecture and design firm Dimorestudio, the train feels proudly Italian in many ways. The six trains are decked out with interiors inspired by 20th century Italian design. On the inside, it has 12 deluxe cabins, 18 suites, and one grand La Dolce Vita Suite. All of them have en-suite bathrooms, and across its carriages, the train also boasts a restaurant, a lounge, and a sophisticated bar, with each train able to accommodate up to 62 guests in total. It can also be booked out for private occasions, such as weddings or corporate events.

It's not just Europe that's getting a new luxury train this year, though – Arsenale Group has also partnered with Saudi Arabia Railways to create the Dream of the Desert, the first-ever luxury cruise rail project in Saudi Arabia. Also scheduled to launch sometime in 2025, this beautiful train will consist of 41 luxurious cabins across 15 cars, a fine dining restaurant and lounge bar, and additional high-end services. It will travel around



ABOVE: Etihad Rail's passenger train is anticipated to be able to carry 36.5 million passengers per year by 2030

BOTTOM: Launched in 2018, the Haramain High Speed Railway connects the holy cities of Madinah and Makkah

1290km from Riyadh across to Saudi Arabia's border with Jordan, passing through stunning desert landscapes, UNESCO World Heritage sites filled with ancient archeological treasures, and lush nature reserves. For the Dream of the Desert, Arsenale has promised design features that are inspired by Saudi heritage.

In the meantime, those who are seeking a taste of historical train journeys can visit the remains of the Hejaz Railway – an historic railway that was the very first in Arabia, constructed during the Ottoman Empire and once having run from Damascus to Madinah. In more recent developments, Saudi Arabia Railways opened the Haramain High Speed Railway in October 2018, linking the Muslim holy cities of Madinah and Makkah through a route between King Abdullah Economic City and Jeddah. It travels across 449.2km at 300km/h with five stations along the way, with a 3.75km branch line linking it to Jeddah's King Abdulaziz International

Airport. At its stations, passengers will find beautiful designs created by award-winning architecture firm Foster + Partners and British engineering firm Buro Happold, with shops, restaurants, mosques, VIP lounges, and even a helipad.

Saudi Arrecently continued to bet on train travel as part of its future, with The Royal Commission for AlUla having come into a partnership with Saudi Railway Polytechnic during winter 2024. Together, they'll work on boosting opportunities for young Saudis looking to launch a career in AlUla and/or the kingdom's rapidly-growing rail sector. The first stage of the agreement is planned to provide vocational training programmes in railway maintenance and operation that will build sector-specific subjects, such as rolling stock and infrastructure through hands-on training.

Another train service that's on its way to make a historic impact in the Middle East is Etihad's Rail passenger train. Etihad Rail has already been

running for some time now, having first been established back in 2009, but until recently, it has only been used for freight purposes.

The passenger train will connect all seven emirates of the UAE, and is anticipated to carry 36.5 million passengers per year by 2030. The locations of its first stations have already been announced, beginning with one in Sakamkam, Fujairah, and the second near Sharjah's University City. It will run across 900km in total, with 400 cars, travelling at 200km/h; getting people from Dubai to Abu Dhabi within 57 minutes, Abu Dhabi to Al Ain within 70 minutes, and Abu Dhabi to Fujairah within 105 minutes. In March 2024, it conducted its first passenger service trial run.

Eventually, it will also be connected with Oman's Etihad Rail network, with future travel times between Abu Dhabi and Sohar estimated to take just an hour and 40 minutes. Etihad Rail's passenger trains will reportedly offer its guests plenty of ways to stay comfortable and entertained, from infotainment systems to charging stations, food and beverages, and more. The experience is rumoured to be no less glamorous than the ideals of the Orient Express, with Etihad Rail also having signed a contract with Arsenale Group for its creation.

From Europe to the Middle East – and everywhere in between – it's clear that train travel is about to make a comeback. And with the perfect blend of nostalgia, cutting-edge innovation, and technology-fuelled comfort supported by vintage design, we're eagerly along for the ride. **BT**

