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Set
The
Tone

From modernism
to maximalism

Riding The Rails

A new era of luxury train travel has been unveiled, as Dream of the Desert charts a path across Saudi Arabia

While luxury train travel is very much a part of historic culture across Europe, Africa and Asia, it's remained an elusive mode of transport for the Middle East. Until now, that is, with the unveiling of Dream of the Desert, the first five-star luxury train in the region.

A collaboration between Saudi Arabia Railways (SAR) and Italian luxury hospitality company Arsenale, it marks an exciting step in redefining luxury train travel in the region, with a rail experience that blends contemporary opulence with the rich cultural heritage of the Kingdom.

Its launch is timed perfectly to embrace the increasingly popular slow travel trend, which is seeing a renaissance in rail travel for those who want to explore the world at a more leisurely pace, with incredible scenery, elevated dining experiences and grand carriages that could rival those of top hotels all part of the appeal.

Ushering in a new era of elegance and escapism, the design of the Dream of the Desert train was masterminded by Lebanon-born architect and interior designer Aline Asmar d'Amman and her studio Culture in Architecture, which is based in Beirut and Paris, with a vision to pay tribute to Saudi culture and craftsmanship. "Dream of the Desert is not only about slow travel. It's a great achievement in terms of sustainable exercise and ultra-luxury upcycling," Aline explains.

It is the first time Aline has worked on the design of a train interior but says the philosophy is the same when it comes to working on large-scale hospitality projects steeped in a patrimonial building. She tells us, "The creative journey starts with context and stories taking us to unexpected yet fertile horizons."

The structures of the train are existing wagons owned by Arsenale, which



WORDS: EMILY BAXTER-PRIEST. IMAGES: SUPPLIED



Clockwise from above:
The gleaming luxury locomotive; Its corridors are a living canvas; Architect and designer Aline Asmar d'Amman; One of 14 opulent suites; The restaurant carriage; A privileged viewpoint

have been completely refurbished in Brindisi, southern Italy, and uplifted with exceptional design features. The train itself consists of 14 carriages home to 34 luxury suites, designed as a moving five-star destination, with reception lounges, restaurant and corridor walls that are described as a 'living canvas', where passengers can absorb the Kingdom's artistic heritage through artwork and curated photography.

Inspired by traditional majlis settings, the lounges feature intricately hand-carved wooden elements, patterns and woven textiles, with duo seats to invite intimate conversations, a bar design inspired by the ancient architecture of Hegra and a private corner nested behind wood sculpted panels in signature green patina inspired by Jeddah's iconic façades. The restaurant, in amber hues and oasis green shades, distills heritage in modern touches, from the lamp shade belt details to the wood carving motif inspired by the gypsum motifs in Saudi's central region. In the suites, wood marquetry, stunning upholstery and fine details amplify the sense of discovery, from sadler/equestrian touches in the curtain tie-back and specific stitching on lampshades to the bold, rich Arabian tapestry of cultures found in the colour schemes.

"Saudi Arabia is witnessing an extraordinary transformation, welcoming guests from the world to discover its tapestry of culture and traditions, to experience art and creativity in the most forward-thinking fashion with a dense program of culture and events all around the year," says Aline. "It's fascinating to be part of this exciting chapter, weaving a vision that is deeply rooted in respecting heritage while infusing modernity."

The train will set off on its inaugural journey in autumn 2026, departing from Riyadh and traversing SAR's Northern Railway network as guests witness some of Saudi's most breathtaking sites from the comfort of this all-new luxury locomotive. ■

