

Interiors

Culture Express

Designed by Aline Asmar d'Amman, the Dream of the Desert train seamlessly blends modern elegance with the rich heritage of Saudi Arabia

By Suha Sabith | April 18, 2025



The unveiling of the *Dream of the Desert* luxury train marks a new era for rail travel in the Middle East, blending world-class hospitality with an immersive cultural experience deeply rooted in Saudi Arabia's heritage. The visionary project was brought to life by Saudi Arabia Railways (SAR) and Italian luxury hospitality company Arsenale in collaboration with the Ministry of Culture, the Saudi Tourism Authority and the Center for Development Authorities Support. Designed by the founder of Culture in Architecture, Aline Asmar d'Amman, *Dream of the Desert* merges modernity with the deep-rooted traditions of Saudi Arabia, offering an immersive experience that is both visually captivating and culturally enriching. "The project reflects centuries of Saudi elegance, embodying the art of travel and desert gatherings," says d'Amman. "More than just a train, it is a journey in itself – one that brings cultural heritage, craftsmanship and timeless design excellence to life."



For d'Amman, the design of *Dream of the Desert* marks a significant departure from her previous work on large-scale hospitality projects such as Palazzo Dona Giovannelli, the upcoming Orient Express Hotel in Venice, and Hôtel de Crillon in Paris. “It’s the first time that I worked on the design of a train interior, but the philosophy is absolutely the same,” she says. “The creative journey starts with context and stories.”

d'Amman’s approach is not just about aesthetics; it’s also about storytelling. “Design is a powerful means of storytelling, a vessel for humanistic values elevated by artistry and craftsmanship.” Each element of the design reflects the rich history and traditions of Saudi Arabia, creating a tangible connection between the past and the present.

Born in Lebanon, d'Amman has a deep connection to the desert that is not just professional but also personal. “I was bathed in an environment of Arabian poetry and lyrics, such as Rumi’s words about the desert and his idea of ‘wide emptiness, peace without any understanding of it.’ The words themselves hold that [sense of] stretch and stillness, the otherworldly desert mystique.”



The interiors of the train are infused with the desert's mystique, blending earthy tones, luxurious textiles and intricate craftsmanship to create an atmosphere of refined elegance. The design process sought to capture the majestic stillness and vastness of the Saudi desert. "Saudi Arabia's pristine natural beauty, with its distinctive sense of immensity and silence, wildness and vastness, only tamed by the Bedouin tradition of patient journeys, appeals to a different kind of travel today," she shares. This profound connection to the desert, with its quiet expanses and timeless beauty, is woven into every element of the train's design.

With a fleet of 14 carriages housing 34 opulent suites, the train is conceptualised as a mobile five-star destination where travellers can indulge in comfort while exploring the Kingdom's most iconic heritage sites. Every detail of the suite design, from the wood marquetry to the luxurious upholstery, reflects the Saudi Arabia's rich heritage, with bespoke touches like equestrian-inspired curtain tiebacks and distinctive stitching on lampshades that evoke the region's deep-rooted traditions. "In the restaurant, for instance, a rich interplay of amber hues and oasis-green accents creates an atmosphere of understated refinement. The iconic Saudi lavender shade, inspired by Rafha's northern region desert flowers, subtly appears in leather stitching – blending in the horse saddler realm – while bespoke carpets reinterpret traditional Southern Arabian carvings in a contemporary motif," shares the designer. Beyond the luxurious interiors, the train is also designed to be an educational and cultural experience. Passengers will be immersed in the artistic heritage of Saudi Arabia through curated artworks and photography displayed along the corridors, showcasing the Kingdom's natural beauty and cultural landmarks. Manufactured in Italy, *Dream of the Desert* seamlessly merges Italian engineering with Saudi craftsmanship to bring forth a sustainable project.



"*Dream of the Desert* is not only about slow travel. It's a remarkable achievement in sustainable practices and ultra-luxury upcycling. The train's wagons are existing Italian carriages owned by Arsenale, which have been completely refurbished in Brindisi, Italy and elevated through design excellence," d'Amman shares. The train is set to begin operations by the end of the third quarter of 2026.