

# FEATURE ARTICLES

## Passenger Train across the Arabian Desert

- by **Bill Johnston**

On a business trip in the early 80's I had the opportunity to take a train ride that very few outside the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia have ever made. With a day to spare on a heavy business itinerary in the Middle East my 4 fellow travellers and I decided to take the train from Riyadh to Damman on the Persian Gulf, or to be more correct from a Saudi perspective, the Arabian Gulf. Riyadh is roughly in the centre of the Kingdom, its biggest city and the country's capital.



*Photo, Riyadh railway station, Bill Johnston*

We had landed from Europe in Jeddah on the Red Sea coast (on the west side of the country) a few days earlier and after a tentative car trip to Mecca were turned back as not being Muslim. Jeddah is remembered as a city of odours, from the smell of grey water being used to irrigate flowers and lawns to the fragrance of the flowers themselves. It is also the nearest airport to Mecca, site of the yearly hajj or pilgrimage. After business in Jeddah and relaxation in a secure westerner's compound a quick flight on Saudia Airlines brought us to Riyadh. In the eighties it was a city under major development caused by an influx of oil revenue.

Demand for building materials was high so our small contingent of wood products suppliers was making a trip to identify customers and needs. We were allowed into the country only by invitation from influential importers. A car tour through the city led by an American ex-pat included "chop-chop square", site a few days earlier of the carrying out of a sentence of death to some thief or murderer. The term: "heads will roll" still applies here, unfortunately. Our

Canadian Embassy escort was keen on having us see more of the countryside – as we were –



so why not a train journey. The Saudi Railways system uses US made equipment with extra air-conditioners on the coach roofs to combat the 40 degree plus heat of the desert. One train a day left at about 10:00 for the 6 hour trip to the Gulf. Only one stop is made, at Hofuf – an oasis in the middle of nowhere. As expected the scenery consisted of sand dunes, the occasional tree or two at a watering hole and camels ranging near and far. Attempts to grow grain in large circles watered by huge sprinklers were common on the eastern end

of the trip as we approached the Gulf.

In Saudi Arabia photography by foreigners is forbidden so the photos you take home were taken unobtrusively. In fact one in our group was not so unobtrusive and had his expensive camera confiscated for a short time, only being returned later after removing the film and giving the film to the train guard for disposal. “Good travellers should always be aware of local sensitivities” was the admonishment.

Train crews and most of those conducting daily business in the Kingdom were in fact Indians and other South Asians. Most spoke English (fortunately) and generally made things work. The train consisted of 2 diesel locomotives (probably GP20’s or similar vintage), power car/baggage, 2 coaches (men only) a dining car with a “family” section behind a curtain where women were permitted and a coach reserved for families, again where women were allowed to travel if accompanied by their husbands. Of course all women were fully covered in their black niqāb with only eyes and ankles visible. Women may be harassed by the religious police if they do not cover their faces. Jeddah, as the most liberal city of Saudi Arabia, is an exception

but few women seemed to take advantage of the exception. They are not allowed to drive cars or travel separately. Our next stop on the tour was Kuwait where these requirements were relaxed somewhat and later in Lebanon where such restrictions do not exist at all of course. Despite assurances the Lebanese civil war had subsided we arrived in Beirut the day the US embassy was blown up with over 60 deaths occurring just 2 blocks from us. But that is another story.

The Saudi train traveled at a relaxed 80 km/h. The infrastructure was well maintained with few rough spots. It was well used by a cross-section of people most in traditional Arab dress. We seemed to be the only foreigners aboard. Extra air filters on the locomotives must surely be used as blowing sand was a constant threat. Arrival in Dammam was exactly on time with crowds of people meeting the train. Once through the crowds a quick taxi ride brought us to the incredible luxury of the Hotel Oberoi overlooking the Gulf.

Today the Saudi Railway Organization (SRO) is still seriously underdeveloped, with the only line still the one noted above and it is the only passenger train service in the entire Gulf Region. According to some sources there are plans to extend the network to Jeddah and build a Mecca - Medina link during the next few years. In more recent years the trains operated by the SRO have 3 classes: Second, First and the delightfully named Rehab. First and Second classes are very similar, with air conditioning and two-by-two seating, but First has a few inches of extra legroom. Rehab (VIP) class, on the other hand, has plush leather seats, roof-mounted flat-panel TVs showing Arabic entertainment, and slick waiting lounges at stations. Trains still have a cafeteria car serving up drinks and snacks, as well as push-trolley service.

This must qualify as the rarest passenger train service that any of us could enjoy.